

PLUNGING INTO THE VERY DEPTHS OF THE SOULS OF OUR PEOPLE:
THE LIFE AND ART OF AARON DOUGLAS

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Abstract

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Visual artist Aaron Douglas is widely recognized as an important figure in African American art history. Recent journal articles, exhibitions and exhibition catalogs, and one monograph have begun to catalog his work and offer some biographical information. Yet, the richness of his life and work has yet to be documented. Douglas stands as an example of the complexities of *African* and *American* representation and identity formation in the United States from the early twentieth century into the present. His multiple roles as visual artist and storyteller, teacher to younger artists, and active public intellectual provide contexts through which to expand upon and complicate scholarship on Douglas, specifically, and American culture and history more generally.

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My family, too, shares in my accomplishment here. My parents, Gary and Brenda Ragar, have often wondered about their daughter who just could not seem to get out of school but have maintained their support and love for me regardless. My sister, Angela Krause, and brother-in-law, Chad Krause, could be counted on for good-natured commentary and counsel, and more than once provided much-needed child care. I know my children especially were grateful for the respite. On a daily basis, Terry O'Connor has demonstrated unfailing care and concern for me, especially as I struggled mightily through the last couple of years. Without him my soda glass would remain unfilled, my stomach would be empty, and far less laughter would fill my life. Thank you. My work here is dedicated to my children, Alex and Emily, who had no choice but to grow up with a mother who was also a student. They have always provided perspective in my life on what is truly important.

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Figure i.1: Carl Van Vechten, *Aaron Douglas*, 1933. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville.

Introduction Seasons

I'm now 72, and I just don't have time enough. Much of these 72 years have been used in preparation. If there's any complaint I have with our situation here in this country, it would be that . . . that you have to start from so far back.¹

¹ Aaron Douglas, *Profiles in Black Achievement: Aaron Douglas* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Guidance Associates, 1973). Filmstrip and cassette tape.

In a recorded interview in 1973 Aaron Douglas suggested the contours of a life that had been devoted to public service. Even as Douglas often stressed hard work and overcoming obstacles through individual achievement, he believed in mentoring and inspiring succeeding generations to even greater accomplishments. While in his lifetime he accomplished much—enough, perhaps, to have catapulted him to the ranks of a Black American elite—Douglas remained connected and in service to those his friend Langston Hughes had embraced and characterized as "the low down folk."² He believed, ultimately, that group prosperity ranked above personal success, and he demonstrated his values in his advice.

Speaking in a rich, deep voice that belied his 72 years, Douglas carefully chose his words for his school-aged audience during the interview:

I would advise the young Black person to go to school . . . the regular school . . . get a diploma³

Douglas suggested a path that he knew well. His own journey had taken him from a segregated grade school, to an integrated high school, a public university, and, ultimately, to a graduate degree in education. Apparently from his earliest years he had a sense of the importance of working toward something beyond the confines of the life into which he was born.

² Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, 23 June 1926, 692. Available online at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/19260623/hughes>.

³ Aaron Douglas, *Profiles in Black Achievement*.

Even as he held fast to some of the early lessons like the importance of a broad education and the power of hope even in the face of daunting challenges, Douglas experienced some powerful shifts in his life. Born in 1899, Douglas began life in a small, quiet midwestern city at the start of the twentieth century, and his early education came largely, though not exclusively, from the white-dominated, mainstream high school he attended. Though in his later life he spoke little about those earliest days, he did mention that all of his teachers were white, and it is clear from materials documenting those years that most of his classmates were as well. Likewise, in his post-secondary education at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln he was surrounded by largely mainstream influences, at least as far as his artistic direction was concerned. He was the first Black student admitted to the fine arts department at the University of Nebraska. In a brief autobiography written at the age of 50, Douglas described how, in that first semester, he "received a citation of first prize for drawing and as a consequence became the 'fair haired' boy of the Art Department."⁴ Douglas's incongruous use of the phrase "fair haired boy" to describe himself was likely intentional. In his autobiography, his awareness of the racialized system within which he worked becomes even clearer as he turns his attention next to the racism he encountered when he tried to enlist in the army reserves in Lincoln. When his service was rebuffed in Nebraska, he moved temporarily to Minneapolis,

⁴ "An Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tenn. (microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

Minnesota, where he successfully participated in a section of the Student Army Training Corps until World War I ended a few months later in the fall of 1918.⁵ Douglas, who seldom provided details of the kinds of racism he encountered, made a point of contrasting the positive treatment he had received in Minnesota to his experience with the reserve military system in Nebraska.

Though Douglas found himself again in a white-dominated educational system at the University of Nebraska, these years also seemed to serve as his awakening to the larger national movements current in the Black community. In later recollections, he described himself during his college years as a regular reader of both the NAACP's publication, *The Crisis*, and the National Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine. He spent his summers working in the auto factories of Detroit, for a glass manufacturer on the shores of Lake Erie, at Dunkirk, New York, and in a steel foundry in Minneapolis trying to earn enough to keep up with the larger-than-anticipated costs of a college education. The impact of these experiences are reflected in the sympathetic treatment of labor found throughout Douglas's work and

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8. Douglas enrolled in classes at the University of Minnesota while living in Minneapolis in the fall of 1918. He must have made an impression while there as well, and apparently he returned to Minnesota during summer vacations from school. Douglas's departure for his senior year at the University of Nebraska merited mention in the Minnesota notes printed in *The Chicago Defender* in September 1921. The column listed Douglas as a "Kappa Alpha Psi man" and a member of The Klub, "the Minneapolis school man's organization." "Minnesota," *Chicago Defender*, 24 September 1921, 14.

helped him develop a visual language to convey the significance of such workers in the development of America.

When he accepted the position of art teacher at the all-Black segregated Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, in fall 1923, Douglas moved into a new phase of life that would increasingly push him along his path of service to the Black community. When, in 1925, he was finally convinced to move to New York to participate in the cultural explosion being ushered along by Harlem leaders, he found himself fully immersed in a Black-centered environment. Though he struggled a bit at first to find his direction in the overwhelming pace of his new life, with help from artistic mentor Winold Reiss; Black leaders like *Crisis* editor W. E. B. Du Bois and *Opportunity* editor Charles S. Johnson; and a range of new friends whose names have come to epitomize the Harlem Renaissance, he soon found his footing. By 1926 he had contributed illustrations to a number of books and magazines, including a set for the pathbreaking book, *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke. Douglas's star was rising in tandem with an optimism among many in Black America in the 1920s that cultural productivity could enhance the status of African Americans.

Such ideas seemed naïve a few years later when the bubble of optimism that had characterized the Harlem Renaissance burst under the pressure of rampant unemployment and hard times brought on for the entire nation by the Great Depression; Black communities in the urban North were hit especially hard. After a year of study in Paris in 1931-32, Douglas returned more mature, with an attitude that

reflected the sobering changes he found in Harlem. His youthful exuberance and predictions of personal stardom were replaced with a deepening conviction that he could play a leadership role among artists. During the 1930s, Douglas reached the zenith of his public recognition and was hailed by both the Black and the white press as one of the preeminent visual artists of Black American life. As much as he could, Douglas used his public status for the betterment of the whole community. Though he was still a young man himself, Douglas earned the admiration of up-and-coming artists like Charles H. Alston and Henry W. Bannarn, who gathered regularly at a studio at 306 West 141st Street. "At 306," wrote artist Jeff Donaldson in his 1974 dissertation on the younger Harlem artists, "Charles Alston deferred to Douglas as 'the dean' and he was accorded the respect due an Elder."⁶ In the decade following his return from Paris, during the height of his popularity, Aaron Douglas served as a mentor and an advocate for the artists of Harlem, just as he increasingly addressed a wider range of public issues.

In 1943 another young African American artist, James A. Porter, published *Modern Negro Art*, which denounced Aaron Douglas. Porter claimed that Douglas "took literally the advice of racial apologists and with a clear conception of African decoration attempted to imitate in stilted fashion the surface patterns and geometric shapes of African sculpture." Porter charged that Douglas had clumsily borrowed the

⁶ Jeff Richardson Donaldson, "Generation '306' – Harlem, New York" (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1974), 37-38.

effects without channeling any of the energy of the originals, whose "representational value is almost negligible, while their modernism is dominant. . . . Mr. Douglas' early style in its general effect bears but scant relationship to the powerful forms and religious message of African Negro art."⁷ While Douglas continued to have his supporters, Porter's excoriation coincided with the steady erosion of Douglas's public reputation. It also coincided with Douglas's choice to spend much of the year at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he threw all his efforts into developing the university's fine arts program, serving as the steward for a major American art collection donated to the university by Georgia O'Keeffe, and mentoring students. Although he and his wife Alta maintained their apartment in Harlem's Sugar Hill district,⁸ the bulk of his time and energy were devoted to Fisk. Douglas did not

⁷ James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (1943; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 104-105. Romare Bearden, who knew Douglas nearly all his life, claimed that Porter's later evaluation of Douglas was less critical, which seems to be borne out by a 1950 Porter *Pittsburgh Courier* column on Black progress in art. While Porter still declined to offer an enthusiastic review of Douglas's work, he provided a more sympathetic analysis of the influence of white patronage and Douglas's study of African motifs. "Very interesting results were achieved by Aaron Douglass [*sic*]," wrote Porter, "who used his findings in paintings and book illustrations." James Porter, "Progress of the Negro in Art During the Past Fifty Years," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 July 1950, 8. For Romare Bearden's comments, see Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African- American Artists: From 1792-the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 134.

⁸ In one of his regular columns for *The Chicago Defender*, Langston Hughes wrote glowingly of "[t]hat house that stands so proudly atop of Sugar Hill, 409 Edgecombe." In his 1946 column he described, "During the 20 years that its apartments have been rented to colored people, it has housed some of Negro New York's most famous personalities. It is still one of Harlem's most fashionable addresses." Aaron and Alta Douglas, he mentioned "were among the first Negro

abandon his paints, however, but he renewed his earlier interest in portraiture, landscapes, and other easel-type paintings, while limiting most of his public commissions to in-house projects for Fisk. While his easel paintings gave Douglas satisfaction and reflected his maturing attitude toward his artistic production, they did not capture the acclaim of critics in the same way his modernist murals and illustrations had.

With the rise in the 1950s and 1960s of a more militant Civil Rights agenda and the attendant Black Arts Movement, Douglas's reputation as an artist was further eclipsed. Younger artists, rebelling in familiar fashion against the old guard, found the work of the "New Negro" artists of the Harlem Renaissance backward and uninspiring. They accused many of the earlier artists of bowing to the desires of the white patrons for stereotypical images rendered in "primitive" fashion or, paradoxically, of attempting to create a "high" art that had little to do with common Black culture. Larry Neal, in his aptly titled 1968 manifesto, "The Black Arts Movement," called the Harlem Renaissance "essentially a failure." "It did not address itself to the mythology and the life-styles of the Black community," wrote Neal. "It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to

occupants of the house. Most of Aaron Douglas' beautiful paintings were done there, and his famous murals designed there." Langston Hughes, "409 Edgecombe," *Chicago Defender*, 12 October 1946, 14.

become its voice and spirit."⁹ As the figurehead of the 1920s visual art movement, Douglas's work at that moment suffered the same rejection, however unwarranted it may seem in retrospect.¹⁰

Criticism of the efficacy of the New Negro Renaissance was not limited to the artists either. Nathan Irvin Huggins's influential 1971 study, *Harlem Renaissance*, established an argument that the leaders of the would-be renaissance were too dependent upon the white establishment to create anything truly and uniquely Black. As he wrote, "[T]he black-white relationship has been symbiotic; blacks have been essential to white identity (and whites to blacks)." "Harlem in the 1920s," he

⁹ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (1968): 39. The rejection of older artists, however was never as complete as manifestos like Neal's suggest. Douglas was listed among "Elders of Distinction" in the program for the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art (CONFABA) convened at Northwestern University in May 1970. Other participants included Larry Neal and Chicago visual art group AFRICOBRA (Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), as well as a literary organization called OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture). Published objectives for the conference suggested goals similar to those Douglas worked toward throughout his career: "preserving, protecting and projecting the visual art legacy of Black people in the United States." Program from the "CONFABA Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art," held May 6-10, 1970, in Evanston, Illinois, Reel 2, File 36, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

¹⁰ With the advantage of hindsight, scholars have begun to challenge the "failure" of the New Negro Renaissance. See, for instance, James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Smethurst examined the roots of the Black Arts Movement, pushing it as far back as the 1930s and the work of Langston Hughes. In his introduction Smethurst stated: "This book also echoes the set of questions that scholars of the New Negro Renaissance have raised since the 1980s: Was the movement a 'failure' in something other than the sense that all cultural movements . . . ultimately 'fail' to achieve their most visionary aims—and simply end?" (7).

explained, "gave to this interdependency a sophistication and charm, but at its very core the game of masks remained the same."¹¹ Huggins took great care to analyze the work of writers, visual artists, performers, and the social leaders. He started, however, from the premise that a successful movement was one that established, in Larry Neal's words, "an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America." The Black Power movement of the 1960s had established "the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms."¹² Huggins's work reflected a central issue common among contemporary scholars: the debate over the role of white patronage. Though Huggins often offered a sympathetic reading of the art, artists, and leaders in his study, from his perspective, the value of their work, however well intentioned, was diminished because of its inherent dependency on mainstream support.¹³

Although Douglas's national profile as an artist declined into near obscurity in the 1940s, his reputation as an important teacher and leader at Fisk continued to grow. He was often invited to speak to Black students at colleges and universities around the country, and he still received painting commissions, though often for the portraits

¹¹ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 84-85.

¹² Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 29.

¹³ Amy Helene Kirschke, in her 1995 monograph on Aaron Douglas, challenges Huggins's conclusion, see especially in chapter three, "An Artist Concerned with Black Life," *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 32-54.

upon which he now focused his artistic energy. And his artistic reputation received a boost when art historian and artist David Driskell arrived at Fisk in 1966 to assume the chairmanship of the art department. After three decades as the only full-time faculty member in the department, Douglas had earned his retirement and wanted Driskell there "to shake up the place."¹⁴ Driskell did so, adding to the staff, procuring new facilities for art students and faculty, and, especially, organizing outstanding new exhibitions. Among those shows, a retrospective exhibition was held at Fisk in the spring of 1971 in tribute to Douglas's many contributions. In 1975, Driskell voiced his admiration for Douglas and challenged prevailing views of his critics:

His art prophetically signalled the new awakening among Black Americans in the 1960's which redefined racial pride and human worth. Thus, the spiritual embodiment of a new awareness of Africa and the gifts of our ancestors were symbolically manifested in his art. One cannot speak of black pride, the plight for social justice or the visual understanding of African American symbols without making reference to the language of form that was created by Aaron Douglas.¹⁵

In this tribute, Driskell referred to Douglas as "the father of Black American art"; a year later he again spoke enthusiastically about Douglas's work in the catalog accompanying his pathbreaking show, *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. The catalog cover featured Douglas's 1944 painting *Building More Stately Mansions* and

¹⁴ See Julie L. McGee, *David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar* (Petaluma, Calif.: Pomegranate Communications, 2006), 77-78.

¹⁵ David C. Driskell, "The Significance of the Aaron Douglas Papers," speech given on the formal presentation of Douglas's papers to Fisk University, April 27, 1975. The speech was published as part of a special issue devoted to Douglas in *BANC!* a publication of Fisk University Library 4-5 (September 1974-June 1975): 3-4.

once more brought national attention to the work of the seemingly forgotten artist (Figure i.2).



Figure i.2: Aaron Douglas, *Building More Stately Mansions*, 1944. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville.

Over the course of the next two decades, especially in the years following Douglas's death in 1979, rising interest in the work of Harlem Renaissance artists of

all types brought a good deal of renewed attention to Aaron Douglas and his work of those years. Amy Kirschke's study of Douglas in the Harlem Renaissance appeared in 1995 and served as a starting point for those seeking to know more about the artist and his life and work. Kirschke offered the first published monograph on Douglas, mostly focused on his years of work in Harlem. In addition to Kirschke's book, a number of exhibition catalogs featured Douglas, broadening the analysis and criticism of his work, and suggesting his prominence as a Black artist. Finally, several surveys of African American art were published, replacing James A. Porter's 1943 text that had so negatively critiqued Aaron Douglas. Unlike Porter, each of the newer histories offered a more comprehensive history of Black art and recognized the centrality of Douglas in the formation of an African American aesthetic in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁶

¹⁶ The earliest art histories often appeared as brief essays published by interested Black leaders or in commentaries from artists. The earliest book-length treatment was probably Freeman Henry Morris Murray's 1916 *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture*, which grew from "lectures (illustrated by lantern slides) at the Summer School and Chautauqua of the National Religious Training School at Durham, N.C., in 1913" (xvii). Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation* (1916; reprint, Freeport, N.Y.: Black Heritage Library Collection by Books for Libraries Press, 1972). Alain Locke published a multitude of commentaries in magazines and books on Black American art. Eventually, Locke produced two books: *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Albany, N.Y.: The J. B. Lyon Press, 1936), and *The Negro in Art* (Philadelphia: Edward Stern & Co., 1940). Three years later, in 1943, James Porter's *Modern Negro Art* (Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969) appeared. Cedric Dover, a British-educated scholar from India, dedicated his *American Negro Art* (London: Studio Books, 1960) to Aaron Douglas. Elsa Honig Fine, a white woman, published *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,

The rising interest in the Harlem and New Negro Renaissance provided another boost for the dissemination of Douglas's images. Reproductions of his modernist murals and illustrations appeared on the covers of numerous books (and at least one record album) on Black culture. In many cases, little or nothing about the artist could be found inside the book, but the choice of his images on so many books attests to the enduring power of his iconography in expressing the spirit of Black life (Figure i.3).¹⁷

1973). In 1978 Samella Lewis first published her appropriately titled study *African American Art and Artists* (3rd ed., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003). Revised editions appeared in 1990 and 2003. Another recent contribution has come from Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford, U.K. and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Richard J. Powell, a foremost authority on Black art today, first published his study about the same time as Patton under the title *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1997). The second edition, revised to include a new conclusion, was renamed *Black Art: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003).

¹⁷ Shown, from left to right, Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery To Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction*; Mandrill, *New Worlds*, Arista Records, 1978, *Building More Stately Mansions*; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), *Building More Stately Mansions*; Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 6th ed. paperback (New York: Penguin USA, 1993), *Into Bondage*; Vincent O. Carter, *Such Sweet Thunder* (South Royalton, Vt.: Steerforth Press, 2003), *From God's Trombones*; Maureen Honey, ed., *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), *The Burden of Black Womanhood*.



Figure i.3: Contemporary covers that feature Aaron Douglas images.

One milestone of this renewed interest in the work of Aaron Douglas was the 2007 retrospective launched by the Spencer Museum of Art, in Lawrence, Kansas. After a decade of planning, the touring exhibition opened in the fall 2007. The ceremonial kick-off of the exhibition brought together scholars, collectors, and enthusiasts of Black visual culture from across the country for a two-day conference focused on the life and work of Douglas. Conference topics covered a broad range of

topics and featured speakers from varied disciplines, all providing their individual perspectives on the life and work of Aaron Douglas.

The keynote address by art historian Richard Powell offered a passionate argument for the inclusion of Douglas in the pantheon of American modernism. Historian Gerald Early provided a social and political context of the New Negro Renaissance. Amy Kirschke, an art historian, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, a literary scholar, each focused on specific moments in Douglas's work that marked important milestones in his growth as an artist. Robert O'Meally, a leader in the nascent jazz studies movement, used the lens of music to discuss aspects of Douglas's visual language, while, similarly, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, a dance scholar, invoked her scholarly approaches to explain some features of Douglas figures. David Krasner discussed the connections between Douglas's work and the rich contexts of New Negro Renaissance theater and drama. Finally, Terry Adkins, an artist and student of Douglas, commented on his mentor's work through the performance of some of his own. The richness and variety of presentations offered a glimpse into the broad reach of Aaron Douglas and suggested his lasting legacy.

Moreover, all of this attention added immensely to understanding Douglas's work, and, to a lesser extent, of recognizing Douglas as a person. An underlying concern for me throughout this study has been to understand Douglas's cultural contributions not only as an artist but also as an art teacher and interpreter of the arts and the Black experience. It seemed to me all too often that much previous

scholarship on Douglas had mostly objectified him, even when it was done positively, and contained him within narrow confines. For example, now familiar in studies of Douglas is the label "father of Black American art" bestowed by David Driskell in tribute in the early 1970s (although, he, too, set it off in quotation marks as if it came from somewhere else).¹⁸ Although such an honorific may be fitting, as I believe it is, it tells us little about who Douglas was. When Driskell first used the appellation, he spoke from first-hand knowledge gained from several years working with Douglas, among a group of friends and colleagues who knew well the commitment of time, energy, and knowledge Douglas had provided over the course of many years. Today few of us who study his work have had the opportunity to meet or get to know Douglas.

From my research, which included accounts of those who knew him personally, I have formed a picture of the man. Driskell, in a talk in Kansas City late in 2007, recalled a quiet, self-effacing man who quickly brushed aside any intimation

¹⁸ In a talk presented at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, on December 2, 2007, Driskell mentioned that the label was first given by Alain Locke. In my research, I have not yet come upon Locke's use of this term, though he did refer to Douglas as a "pioneer" in his writings. See Locke, "The American Negro as Artist," *American Magazine of Art* 23, no. 3 (1931): 218; Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Albany, N.Y.: The J. B. Lyon Press, 1936), 67-68. I also have not found a citation for Locke using the term "pioneering Africanist," though this phrase, too, appears over and over again without specific attribution. David Driskell uses the phrase in a discussion about Douglas in the film *Hidden Heritage: The Roots of Black American Painting*, Landmark Films, 1990: "Aaron Douglas is the leading painter of the Renaissance movement; a pioneering Africanist, he accepted the legacy of the ancestral arts of Africa and developed his own original style, which was geometric symbolism."

of his personal greatness. Rather, Douglas argued that the significance of his work should be judged on the basis of its contribution to the improvement of the Black community that meant so much to him. Driskell described him as "quiet and unobtrusive, but present," as a "gentle" man with "no vanity" who "didn't believe in showcasing self."¹⁹ He adored his wife, Alta Mae Sawyer Douglas, and was devastated by her untimely death in 1958. A sheath of saved correspondence from caring friends and family to Douglas upon her passing fills one file in the papers donated to Fisk University in 1974.²⁰ Douglas called her "the most dynamic force in my life."²¹

Students noted that he was a tough taskmaster, but that he offered much if one were willing to listen to him. They remember him at times as quiet and absorbed in his work, yet willing to talk with them or share reminiscences about his own experiences. He was critical of his own work, too, always striving for improvement. Even after his retirement, when asked to restore his murals at Fisk, rather than simply provide necessary maintenance, Douglas used it as an opportunity to revise the color palette he had originally chosen. "He had returned at the age of seventy," explained art historian Amy Kirschke, "after a lifetime of pondering his work and reviewing his

¹⁹ Personal notes from Driskell lecture.

²⁰ "Correspondence—Re: death of Alta Douglas (Wife) 1958-60," Reel 1, Box 1, File 17, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

²¹ Aaron Douglas, "An Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 12, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

ideas about color theory and what the murals were meant to convey."²² With just one student assistant, Douglas carefully reworked the entire mural series over the course of five years.

Over time, and through such stories, I feel that I have begun to understand more about the person that was Aaron Douglas. I have a poster of a 1933 Carl Van Vechten photograph of Douglas (Figure i.1). Van Vechten, a white American critic, photographer, and writer known for his patronage of Black artists, captured the artist in a contemplative moment with only a bit of light from a nearby window illuminating his still face. Over the course of the many years now that I have studied Aaron Douglas, I have often found myself meditating on that image. It reminds me that Douglas was a real person, with hopes and dreams for his own life, of course, but even more, that he was a person of integrity who held firmly to his convictions throughout his entire adult life. In his own ways, sometimes publicly and other times more quietly, he constantly strove for ways to improve the world by using his talents to fight for issues of social justice. He cared for and believed in the Black community, to which he devoted his entire adult life. Above all, he cherished to the end the very American dream of prosperity for all through hard work, education, and equal opportunity, even as he witnessed firsthand the long, arduous, and frustrating struggle to bring the dream to reality. With this in mind, I have endeavored here to

²² Amy Helene Kirschke, "The Fisk Murals Revealed: Memories of Africa, Hope for the Future," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 123.

present a study of Aaron Douglas that speaks to his subjectivity, to his goals and perspectives, even as I hope that I will enhance out understanding of him.

In the first chapter, "A New Negro Artist," I introduce Douglas as a product of his midwestern roots. Though his years in Harlem had a clear impact on his development as a social and political activist, many of his basic ideals—about racial progress, the importance of education, and the history of Black struggle and success--had already been established in his formative years growing up in Topeka, Kansas, and, later, at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. His move to Harlem did allow him to further develop his signature style that has come to identify his key public works. In his murals and illustrative work, he garnered attention through the use of an aesthetic that was at once both modern in its abstracted, Art-Deco inspired look and still representational enough to tell a story. The modernism of his signature style has remained the basis for most contemporary studies.

The recent traveling exhibition, for instance, situates Douglas's work within a western art historical framework by proclaiming him an "African American Modernist." By putting Douglas within the framework of modernism, the organizers provided patrons a mainstream connection for comprehending his work within the larger context of twentieth-century cultural production. At the same time, they continued another tradition of mainstream art history by attaching the modifier "*African* American" before the label modernist. They positioned Douglas's work as peripheral, though still connected, to notions of modernism.

Doing so makes sense from a traditional art historical position that defines modernism from a largely stylistic perspective, a turn away from the realism of the nineteenth century that reflected man's interest in nature and toward a more abstracted form that better reflected a societal change sparked by rising industrialism—the emergence of a machine age.²³ I argue that such approaches, however, take only a

²³ A number of treatments of this topic have been produced. See Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996); Jonathan Harris, "Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960," *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties*, ed. Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris, Charles Harrison (New Haven & London, Yale University Press in Association with The Open University, 1993), 3-76; Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," orig. in *Partisan Review*, Fall 1939; reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5-22; and Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," orig. in *Forum Lectures* (Washington, D.C.: Voice of America), 1960; reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 85-93.

Clement Greenberg identified modernism as a "high" art form, to be distinguished from the "mass" or "low" cultural forms emerging as a result of mechanization techniques. Such ideas continue to influence current art historical thinking, but Greenberg's ideas have been challenged and modified by more recent, postmodern theoretical frameworks.

For a definition of modernism that works against Greenberg and more readily admits the inclusion of Aaron Douglas, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987). Baker provides an applicable definition that self-consciously begins from an Afrocentric vantage point. Coming full circle from Greenberg's articulation of the centrality of formal issues in defining modern art, Baker instead argues that form emerges from purpose. His framework arises from the material he calls "soundings" based on ideas of discursive rituals, which he suggests can be seen in "literature, music, art, graphic design, and intellectual history. It is *not* confined to traditionally defined belles lettres or to Literature with a capital and capitalist *L*" (8). Just as Aaron Douglas's

surface view of Aaron Douglas's work and constrict our full understanding of both the breadth and depth of his lifetime achievements.²⁴ Yes, he was influenced by

murals blur the line between what Greenberg (and others) deemed "high" and "popular" culture, Baker's theoretical model creates a meaning of modernism that does not rely on such distinctions. Indeed, modernist production flows from "[t]he folk [who] not only come to the domain of culture but also refigure the very notion of 'culture' for the modern world," according to Baker (66).

²⁴ Amy Helene Kirschke's monograph, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, & The Harlem Renaissance*, exemplifies this impulse. Kirschke focused on Douglas's work during the Harlem Renaissance years (1925-1934) and the development of his modernist style in his magazine and book illustrations and murals. She convincingly argued against criticisms articulated most strongly by Nathan Huggins that Harlem Renaissance artists largely were unsuccessful in their work, because of their deep ties to white patronage and the decline of Black urban communities, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. See Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). Kirschke based her disagreement with Huggins on evidence of Douglas's artistic achievements looking at the development of his own artistic language, which was steeped in African and African American influences. With her book, she provided an opening for further studies (including this one).

Similarly, most of the exhibition catalog entries that have appeared in recent years add to our understanding of Douglas's development of his signature artistic style but offer less in understanding Douglas as the deeply involved teacher, activist, and, ultimately, public intellectual that he was. Examples of such catalogs include: David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976); Gary A. Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright, *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation* (Newark: Newark Museum, 1989); *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, (2nd ed.; New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994); Joanna Skipworth, ed., *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Richard J. Powell and Jock Reynolds, *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art and New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem; Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by MIT Press, 1999); and Susan Earle, ed., *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).²⁵ Sydelle Iris Rubin, "Emigrants in Harlem: New Perspectives on Miguel Covarrubias and Winold Reiss," PhD dissertation, Boston University, 2002, 99-124. Reiss developed first an interest in Native American culture, which may have been the result, in part, of some anti-German prejudice he experienced in New York City following the United States entry

modernism and by the Egyptian motifs, elements that clearly reflected current trends and were integral to his work. Nonetheless, Douglas was deeply engaged as an illustrator in exploring aspects of Black experience, and as a muralist he was producing narrative history paintings, another important genre of the 1920s and 1930s. To see him and his major contributions as only a "modernist" example is to misunderstand so much of his art. Thus, in the first chapter I attempt to contextualize Douglas's early development as an artist, as a teacher, and as a public intellectual within the New Negro Movement.

In the next chapter, "Tides of Change," I delve more deeply into the impact of Douglas's first decade or so in New York, during which he lived in a tight-knit Black community and involved himself in the many activities available to him, including training in art and social activism. Like many young artists, especially in the 1920s, Douglas searched for an artistic formula that involved the intertwined development of style and purpose. For his art training, he gained much from two years under the tutelage of Winold Reiss (1886-1953), a Bavarian-born immigrant who arrived in the United States in 1913 to escape growing military conflict in Germany and with the hopes of finding more opportunities in the United States. Reiss soon established himself as a modernist leader by co-founding the Society of Modern Art (1914) and

into World War I in 1917. A similar impulse led him, in 1924, to Harlem where he forged bonds with Harlem leaders Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson. These friendships, in turn, led to Aaron Douglas's introduction to Reiss almost immediately after his arrival in Harlem in June 1925, and to Reiss's generous scholarship that allowed Douglas to train with him at no cost starting that fall.

opening an art school in New York City (1916).²⁵ Douglas fondly recalled the training he received from Reiss, even as the elder artist challenged him to develop a style reflective of his "African" roots. Douglas privately questioned Reiss's racialized thinking at times, but he used Reiss's artistic teachings as a springboard for his own artistic development.²⁶

Reiss's focus on African sources for Douglas's inspiration was supported by Black scholar Alain Locke and by the white philanthropist Albert C. Barnes, both of whom helped shape Douglas's maturing artistic philosophy.²⁷ In 1924, Barnes

²⁵ Sydelle Iris Rubin, "Emigrants in Harlem: New Perspectives on Miguel Covarrubias and Winold Reiss," PhD dissertation, Boston University, 2002, 99-124. Reiss developed first an interest in Native American culture, which may have been the result, in part, of some anti-German prejudice he experienced in New York City following the United States entry into World War I in 1917. A similar impulse led him, in 1924, to Harlem where he forged bonds with Harlem leaders Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson. These friendships, in turn, led to Aaron Douglas's introduction to Reiss almost immediately after his arrival in Harlem in June 1925, and to Reiss's generous scholarship that allowed Douglas to train with him at no cost starting that fall.

²⁶ See Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 64.

²⁷ Alain Locke (1886-1954) graduated from Harvard University; then, as the first Black Rhodes Scholar, he studied at Oxford University for three more years. After completing one more year of study at the University of Berlin, he returned to the United States, and in 1912, began a long association with Howard University in Washington, D.C. as a member of their philosophy department. Locke remained at Howard until his retirement in 1953, except for a period between 1925-1927 when "he engaged in research literary work" and the following year, when he taught at Fisk University. In 1924, Locke edited the special issue of *Survey Graphic* devoted to Harlem, and, the following year edited the expanded book version, *The New Negro*. While Winold Reiss contributed many of the illustrations for *Survey Graphic*, his student, Aaron Douglas, arrived in Harlem in time to join Reiss in providing illustrations for *The New Negro*. For more on Locke and his many contributions to Black American education and cultural production see Rayford W. Logan, Eugene C.

accepted an invitation from Alain Locke to contribute an essay, "Negro Art and America," to *Survey Graphic* and selected pieces of his African art collection were reproduced in the magazine as well. Locke believed that the study of these early African sculptures could be a useful inspiration for Douglas, just as they had been for European modernists. In 1927, Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett, a writer and Howard University art professor, accepted scholarships from Barnes to study his collection housed in Merion, Pennsylvania. According to a newspaper account, "This is first time Negro students have been permitted to study there." In describing Douglas, the account noted, "His specialty is modern art, Negro art claiming his deepest interest."²⁸ Access to Barnes's collection provided Douglas an opportunity to

Holmes, and G. Franklin Edwards, eds., *The New Negro Thirty Years Afterward* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1955).

Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951), a self-made millionaire, began early in the twentieth century to amass a collection of American and European modernist art. His interest in art deepened as he studied the works, and, in 1922, he established a relationship with Paul Guillaume, a French artist who found inspiration for modern, abstracted forms in "primitive" African sculpture. Barnes immediately began purchasing African sculpture to add to his own collection. In the same year, Barnes chartered a foundation for the purpose of education and advancement of the arts. A year later he named philosopher John Dewey (*Art and Experience*) director of education, even as Barnes continued writing and speaking on art and art theory himself. Barnes had a reputation of being eccentric and sometimes difficult, which resulted in frequent disagreements even with friends. See Howard Greenfield, *The Devil and Dr. Barnes: Portrait of an American Art Collector* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1987) and Mary Ann Meyers, *Art, Education, & African-American Culture: Albert Barnes and the Science of Philanthropy* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004). On the friendship (and strains) between Barnes and Locke, see Mark Helbling, "African Art: Albert C. Barnes and Alain Locke," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (1982): 57-67.

²⁸ "Art Scholarship Winners," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 October 1927, 5.

see first-hand the best collection of African sculpture in the United States at the time, as well as an outstanding group of European and American modernist works.

Like other American artists of the day, Douglas searched not only for his artistic voice, but also for a larger meaning and purpose behind his work. Just as white artists looked for what historian Henry Steele Commager called America's "usable past," so too did Douglas and other Harlem artists.²⁹ For white artists the search for an American character started with a premise that such meaning, generally, would come in contrast to a European past from which they struggled to find their own voice. The rise of the American scene painters in the 1920s and 1930s exemplified this impulse.³⁰ While there was no single answer to what constituted the American scene, even among white artists, one of the little magazine editors, Robert Coady, counseled looking to the everyday items of America. American art, he suggested in the inaugural issue of *Soil* in 1917, "is in the spirit of the Panama Canal, the skyscraper, the bridges and docks . . . , Walt Whitman . . . , electric signs, the factories and mills—this is American art."³¹ While such definitions seem to leave

²⁹ Henry Steele Commager, "The Search for a Usable Past," *American Heritage* 16, no. 2 (1965), reprinted in Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 3-27. See also American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* 64 (April 11, 1918): 337-341.

³⁰ See Matthew Baigell, *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially chapter four on "American Art and National Identity: The 1920s," 60-79.

³¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 72. Originally published in *Soil* 1 (January 1917): 55.

room for multiple impulses, in practice, African Americans (and other ethnic and racial minorities) were left out of the formula, often seen as cultureless or, at least, less developed. Matthew Baigell recognized these omissions in comments upon the work of American Regionalist painters Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, who Baigell wrote, "wanted their art to grow from and relate to the American environment. A problem I had with these artists was that they confused their own immediate experiences in America with the experiences of Americans in general. They thought . . . that their particular experiences were in fact universal ones."³² As Baigell points out, white artists often missed the richness of national culture in their search for "real" American character.

Mainstream ignorance, however, did not stop Black artists from also mining—and asserting--their own "usable past" for inspiration. As historian and writer James Weldon Johnson proclaimed in *Harper's* magazine in 1928, "it is now more or less generally acknowledged that the only things artistic that have sprung from American soil and out of American life, and been universally recognized as distinctly American

³² *Ibid.*, 5. As Baigell argues, such perspectives omit not only Blacks, but also women, and "anybody who lived either far west of the Mississippi River or east of the Ohio, and anybody tainted by too many European memories." Barbara Melosh, in her study of gender and New Deal art of the 1930s finds similar elisions for women as "the strains of economic depression reinforced the containment of feminism that had begun after the winning of suffrage." Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 1. The difference for Black artists in the 1930s was that even as notions of the American scene or American character ignored Black culture, federal programs offered economic support, even to Black artists.

products, are the folk creations of the Negro."³³ Johnson directed white audiences toward the wellspring of inspiration from which many young Black artists drew: the Black folk. The poet and writer Langston Hughes, a good friend of Aaron Douglas, stated it most eloquently in his well-known 1926 reply to Black writer George Schuyler in the pages of *The Nation*. In response to Schuyler's claim that "Negro art 'made in America' is as non-existent as the widely acclaimed profundity of Calvin Coolidge," Hughes replied that the true Negro art would come by looking to "the low-down folks, the so-called common element." Hughes continued, "These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations."³⁴ Even as white artists searched "American standardizations" for something unique, some Black artists reveled in their cultural difference.

Douglas, then, found his artistic impulse from multiple sources. First, he had his mainstream American roots, cultivated through his traditional education and training in Topeka, Kansas, and Lincoln, Nebraska—cities geographically located in the American heartland. Next, he found materials for showcasing a long, proud African history in the Barnes Collection and through his own studies from the vast

³³ James Weldon Johnson, "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," *Harper's* 157 (November 1928): 770.

³⁴ George S. Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum," *The Nation* 122 (June 16, 1926): 662–663. Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."

resources in the Schomburg Collection held at the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library. Finally, like his friend Langston Hughes, Douglas drew great inspiration from those he once called the everyday people who surrounded him in Harlem. In a moment of poetic eloquence of his own, in December 1925, Douglas wrote to Hughes:

Your problem, Langston, my problem, no our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. Not white art painted black. . . .Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let's do the impossible. Let's create something transcendently material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.³⁵

Aaron Douglas shared Hughes's enthusiasm for the culture of Black Americans as a source for artistic inspiration and the development of a distinctly American voice. This enthusiasm comes through, especially, in the public mural commissions Douglas completed in the late-1920s through early-1930s.

After situating Douglas within this Harlem milieu, in chapter four, "From Self-Reliance to Racial Uplift," I examine his further development as a public intellectual as he increasingly involved himself in social and political activity in the years of the Great Depression, leading to World War II. Upon the completion of his 1934 mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life*, Douglas told journalist Ted Poston that he

³⁵ Aaron Douglas to Langston Hughes, December 21, 1925, James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

had experienced a philosophical turn in his life.³⁶ Like many Americans, Douglas found the bleak economic and political landscape disheartening, and he turned to Marxist teachings to help explain some of the upheaval. Although there is no evidence Douglas joined in the Communist Party, he was deeply radicalized during these years and traveled in those circles. As part of that radicalization, Douglas and his wife, Alta, involved themselves with many organizations aimed at aiding those in need and promoting racial, economic, and political progress. Douglas continued to use his art as one outlet for the expression of his social and political aims, even as he took leadership roles within both the artistic and the general community, especially—but not exclusively—in activities that would help Blacks. By this time, Douglas had fully immersed himself in a Black-centered world, and his growing nationalism came through. Douglas had emerged as a Black public intellectual.

In staking such a position for Douglas, it seems necessary briefly to define the "Black public intellectual." The notion of "public intellectual" grows from myriad roots. According to the *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, intellectuals are "persons whose main activity is the production or evaluation of ideas." The discussion goes on to explore the changing meaning of this notion based upon historical and geographical context, suggesting that in the United States "where anti-intellectualism is a powerful political force," intellectuals carry far less political clout than in some

³⁶ T. R. Poston, "Murals and Marx: Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left With PWA Decoration," *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 November 1934, 9.

other nations "where intellectual achievement often translates into public authority."³⁷

This definition, too, offers the roots of intellectual thought within ideas of political opposition, especially that provided by neo-Marxists.

In the United States, mainstream development of the intellectual tradition has recently been the subject of much debate. Lawrence Buell, for example, argues that Ralph Waldo Emerson was "the first public intellectual in the history of the United States."³⁸ In a discussion of this assessment, Christopher Clausen suggests that the powerful ideal of "Self Reliance," which Buell suggests best represents Emerson's contribution to early-nineteenth-century society, has become the downfall of contemporary would-be public intellectuals. "To a considerable extent," Clausen states, "the public intellectual has of late been willed into being in an effort to undo the work of Emerson and his followers—of a man who in his external life seemed very much like a present-day star professor."³⁹ Clausen highlights a fissure that has been debated since at least the mid-1990s in the pages of the *New York Times* and through a series of book publications regarding the status of American intellectuals: who are these intellectuals and where do we find them?

³⁷ "intellectuals" *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, ed. Craig Calhoun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). *Oxford Reference Online*, (Oxford University Press). <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t104.e84>, accessed 2 February 2005.

³⁸ Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

³⁹ Christopher Clausen, "Public Intellectual Number One," *New Leader* 86, no. 4 (2003): 15-16.

Clausen claims the popularization of the term "public intellectual" with Russell Jacoby, who in 1987 suggested "a public intellectual was a nonprofessor who lived in a big city—preferably New York—and wrote profoundly but accessibly about politics from a Leftist perspective."⁴⁰ Jacoby laments the end of the public intellectual as, increasingly, such roles are filled through the work of academics in universities. New York University history professor Thomas Bender offered a definition in a 1996 *New York Times* article: A public intellectual "'is a person who intervenes in a public conversation with critical commentary.' . . . [Bender] added that the public intellectual is typically independent of institutions and the academy, a 'general thinker who is distinguished from an expert.'"⁴¹ Thus, Bender also suggests that a public intellectual generally works outside academe, but he inserts the significance of "public conversation" and "general" thinking, allowing for the possibility of such figures arising from university settings. Bender also, in this definition, dismisses any particular political position, which has been another point of disagreement in recent debates over who is in and who remains outside the rubric of public intellectual.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* See also Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

⁴¹ Thomas Bender quoted in *New York Times*, "Storm Center" by Sarah Kershaw, 1 December 1996, CY3. For more from Bender on this topic, see his books *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Knopf, 1987) and *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

Regardless of the debates, the mainstream genealogy of American public intellectual life focuses upon the development of a cadre of mostly leftist, Jewish writers in New York City of the 1930s and 1940s, often referred to as the "New York intellectuals." They engaged in public discourse intended for a politically aware audience, and they were frequent contributors to the journal *Partisan Review*. According to this genealogy, they and their successors after World War II also concentrated in New York, but gradually made their way into the academy where they found a source of steady income to support their work.⁴² They were unapologetic in speaking from unique subject positions—for Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe, for instance, from a New York, urban, Jewish perspective; for Edmund Wilson, for instance, from an old genteel American tradition. In the academy, literature and art, on the one hand, and politics and economics, on the other, were often viewed as antithetical; these public intellectuals saw no such divisions.⁴³

⁴² For more on this see Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals*; Bender, *New York Intellect and Intellect and Public Life*; Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); and John Michael, *Anxious Intellectuals: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁴³ A 1998 documentary on the New York Intellectuals aired on PBS stations followed the lives of Irving Kristol, Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Glazer. An accompanying website provides a genealogical breakdown listing "The Elders: coming of age in the late 1920s and early 1930s," "The Younger Brothers: coming of age in the mid and late 1930s," "The Second Generation: coming of age in the late 1930s and early 1940s," and "The Younger Brothers: coming of age in the late 1940s and early 1950s." The website emphasizes the role of the Jewish intellectual community in New York through the years by listing secondarily "Gentile Cousins" and "European Relatives." While all of these sources highlight ongoing debates in

Though the origins of Black public intellectuals differed sharply from the experiences of whites, they did share much in common. Like New York Jewish intellectuals, Black public intellectuals engaged in public discourse, transcending Black issues but not forgetting about Black concerns. Like the New York Jews, they participated from a racial or ethnic subject position; they rejected attempts to see themselves as deracinated. While they spoke out on Black issues—opposing lynching and disfranchisement, exposing Jim Crow, advocating Black initiatives—and wrote about and painted narratives of their people's histories and experiences—they also spoke out self-consciously as Black people on many other issues of general concern. In the late-nineteenth century they often opposed American imperialism and could be found on both sides of the debate over immigration. They tended to support the Spanish-American War, but they opposed annexing new territories and opposed the guerilla war the United States waged in the Philippines. In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were strident voices for broadening the franchise and protecting civil rights. In the 1930s Black public intellectuals were mostly a progressive voice, and they discussed politics, economic distress, the Spanish Civil War, and the threat of fascism. As a group they were a voice against colonialism.

American society about the definition and role of public intellectuals, they ignore the parallel development of *Black* public intellectuals. *Arguing the World*, produced and directed by Joseph Dorman (A Riverside Film Productions in association with Thirteen/WNET, 1997). The website may be found at <http://www.pbs.org/arguing/index.html> (accessed 7 February 2005). The genealogy is available at http://www.pbs.org/arguing/nyintellectuals_geneology.html (accessed 7 February 2005).

The genealogy of Black public intellectuals has been explored less than that of white intellectuals. As a formally organized group, they probably emerged in 1897 with the formation of the American Negro Academy. In December 1896, prominent race leader, Episcopal priest, Pan-Africanist, and perhaps the leading nineteenth-century Black intellectual in America, Alexander Crummell (1819-1898) gathered a small group of men together in Washington, D.C., to discuss organizing a Black scholarly society. The "African Academy," as Crummell proposed, which would serve as a venue for educated and talented men ("graduates or Professors in Colleges: Literary characters; Authors; Artists, and distinguished writers") to take the lead to in promoting and supporting the betterment of their race in response to an increasingly hostile American scene.⁴⁴ At the suggestion of the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, the group adopted the name "The American Negro Academy," reflecting the increasing popularity of the term "Negro" as a name that "expressed a sense of racial pride and included black Americans of all colors and backgrounds."⁴⁵ With Crummell elected president, the Academy met for the first time on March 5, 1897, where the elderly leader delivered an address outlining the general goals of the organization: "What then, it may be asked, is the special undertaking we have before us in this Academy? My answer is the civilization of the Negro race in the United States, by the scientific

⁴⁴ For a thorough history of the organization see Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *The American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981). Crummell quoted on page 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

processes of literature, art, and philosophy, through the agency of the cultured men of this same Negro race."⁴⁶ Crummell argued that improvement for Black Americans would come as the educated among the community shouldered their responsibility to "guide both the opinions and habits of the crude masses" into a better life. The older generation must heed the call, he counseled, to "bring forth, stimulate and uplift all the latent genius, garnered up, in the by-places and sequestered corners of this neglected Race."⁴⁷ Among those invited members listening to Crummell at the first meeting of the American Negro Academy was the emerging young scholar and race leader W. E. B. Du Bois.

Du Bois shared many of Crummell's ideas about the need for racial uplift of the downtrodden masses through the leadership of an educated elite. While he outlined some of these same ideals in his own address to the 1897 gathering,⁴⁸ a fuller development—along with a lasting name—came in his 1903 essay, "The Talented

⁴⁶ Alexander Crummell, "Civilization: The Primal Need of the Race" in American Negro Academy, *Occasional Papers No. 3* (Washington, D.C.: The American Negro Academy, 1897), 3-7. Reprinted in *Black Nationalism in America*, ed. John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), 139-143. Wilson J. Moses, in his book *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1978) labels these notions of "civilizing" the Negro to compete in (white) American society as "civilizationist" to distinguish them from competing ideas of accommodationism (such as that espoused by the popular leader Booker T. Washington) and separatism (such as supported by efforts to "return" Black Americans to Africa).

⁴⁷ Crummell, "Civilization," in *Black Nationalism in America*, 142-143.

⁴⁸ See W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in American Negro Academy, *Occasional Papers No. 2* (Washington, D. C.: The American Negro Academy, 1897), reprinted in *Black Nationalism in America*, 250-262.

Tenth."⁴⁹ "The Negro race," Du Bois pronounced, "is going to be saved by its exceptional men."⁵⁰ In this bold statement Du Bois codified an idea that had been developing in the Black American community for some time--one that coincided with, though developed differently from, early twentieth-century mainstream devotion to an educated, elite leadership. Du Bois's suggestion of a Talented Tenth of race leaders set the tone for the generations that followed.

In "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois offers some defining elements for the idea of a Black public intellectual. One key element Du Bois suggests is the relationship of Black leadership to the masses. While many have subsequently argued about the efficacy of Du Bois's obvious elitism in suggesting that, to use his mentor Alexander Crummell's words, the Negro masses needed the "civilizing" leadership of an educated and gifted Black leadership, Du Bois (like Crummell) surely had the interests of the Black masses in mind. Du Bois speaks of the necessity of not only education, but also of self-sacrifice as a necessity for Black leadership. Such sacrifice was to come as a consequence of using one's talents for the betterment of the whole community and not simply for self-absorption and personal accumulation, which he observed was rampant in the mainstream. Implicit in this top-down system of racial uplift was an understanding of Black Americans as a separate—if connected--

⁴⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," *The Negro Problem* (New York: Arno Press, 1903) reprinted with a new preface by August Meier (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

community from (white) Americans.⁵¹ In speaking on issues of uplift and race, Du Bois and the members of the Negro Academy spoke both as Negroes and Americans; they spoke from a racial perspective and transcended that perspective. And they addressed all Americans, not just Blacks.

By the time Aaron Douglas reached Harlem in the mid-1920s, a Black community—with an attendant group of leaders—had become well established. The community of Harlem, located in upper Manhattan, had grown to become the largest Black city in the nation. Yet in many ways it was boundless; it came to represent all Blacks living in Manhattan, the many diverse and separate communities often depicted as one. Its members included not only African Americans, but also significant numbers of immigrants from the West Indies, Jamaica, Cuba, Africa, and elsewhere. Citizens of Harlem included a number of recognized national leaders such as Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, Walter White, and, sporadically, Alain Locke. These men provided the framework for the development of a more cohesive Black American culture than had been previously known, and they used their positions as Black intellectuals to participate in mainstream American intellectual life.⁵²

⁵¹ Du Bois most eloquently speaks on this "twoness" in his 1903 treatise, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

⁵² A parallel development of community and leadership can be found in Chicago at the same time, and on a smaller scale in other American cities.

These men, too, served as the forefathers for the next generation of would-be Harlem leaders like Douglas. Like the older generation, the younger group was mostly college-educated men that recognized themselves as responsible to a larger Black community. They learned from and shared many of their ideas with their intellectual parents. Like the later New York Jewish intellectuals who participated in mainstream American intellectual life, commenting on issues that transcended Jewish ones, but from a Jewish subjectivity, so too Black public intellectuals wrote from a subject viewpoint that represented themselves—they wrote and painted from a Black subjectivity. In doing so, they could engage in all issues they found of interest, whether they were exclusively Black community issues or not.

This community provided the bedrock for Aaron Douglas's growth as an intellectual leader. Even while living in Harlem as a young man, Douglas came to be recognized as more than a visual artist, even as his success at his art enhanced to his recognition. As a group of even younger artists were drawn to the city with the hope of gaining success for themselves and engaging in the public sphere, they looked to Aaron Douglas as a role model and mentor. Charles Alston, for instance, often hosted a group at his own studio at 306 West 141st Street in the mid-1930s. Douglas, who by 1934 had received a federal commission to produce the Harlem library murals, held the position of successful elder for this group.

In offering this reading of Douglas and his work, I am suggesting a model that may be useful for the study of other artists as well. I am not suggesting that only

Douglas provided this role, even within his own community at the time. We know, for instance, of the role in Harlem of the under-recognized artist Augusta Savage, who often placed her own art second to the nurturing of younger artists, passing along the notions of responsibility to the community as a whole. Instead, what I hope to suggest is a larger framework for comprehending the role of art and artists in our society.

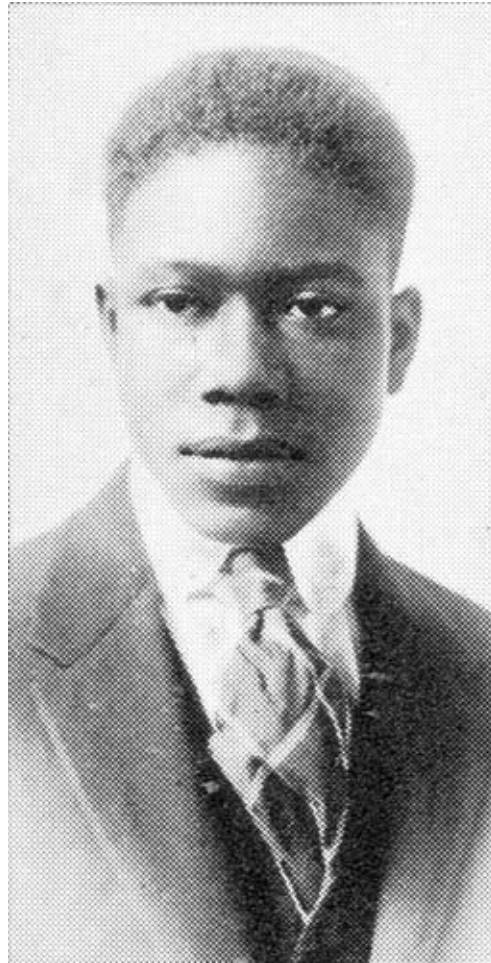


Figure 1.1: Aaron Douglas, in his senior year at Topeka High School, from the 1917 yearbook.

Chapter One

A New Negro Artist

In his later years, Aaron Douglas frequently spoke to a younger generation about his pioneering experiences. In his lectures, he offered a broader historical context for measuring African Americans' continued achievements. In 1973, for example, Douglas drew parallels between his own journey and that facing his audience of Fisk University students:

Then, as now, the Negro was extremely restless and deeply desirous of achieving a better life, not only in the great beyond, but here on this earth as well. Then, as now, the Negro had become acutely aware of the possibilities for a new life better than any he had ever known in this country before. Then, and to some extent now, virtually every avenue and every door was shut against black men who sought to enter the good life and share the benefits promised to every hard-working, law-abiding citizen by the founding fathers of this nation.¹

By the time he delivered this lecture, Douglas had already lived a full life, starting with his birth to migrant laborers in Kansas, then breaking paths for Black students into art education in a conservative Midwestern university, thriving as a noted participant in the cultural renaissance of Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, and settling into a leadership role as a member of the Fisk University faculty. When Douglas spoke of the Negro "acutely aware of the possibilities for a new life better than any he had ever known in this country before," he drew from his own experiences.

Growing up in a small midwestern city in the first decades of the twentieth century, he witnessed early the paradox of a relatively progressive community supported by a well-educated Black middle-class, even as he often found himself limited to the kinds of back-breaking labor performed by those on the bottom rungs of society. This early recognition fueled a life-long optimistic belief in the power of education for personal and group improvement, tempered and bracketed by a more pragmatic appreciation for the thankless work provided by those could not obtain

¹ Aaron Douglas, lecture notes entitled "The Harlem Renaissance," written for the Fisk University Negro Culture Workshop, March 18, 1973, Reel 1, Box 3, File 2, 1, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tenn. (microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

such benefits. Douglas studied first-hand both the great artists and writers of the world *and* the everyday people who struggled just to make a living. Throughout his life, he seemed to have a foot in each of these settings, allowing him to offer guidance to those who followed in negotiating the rocky racial terrain of the United States in the twentieth century.

The heady years of the New Negro Renaissance in Harlem tremendously influenced the development of Aaron Douglas as an artist and as a person. In the span of his nearly eighty-year life, Douglas's career echoed and amplified many of the themes that defined the excitement of the renaissance period. Just as friends like Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman worked at developing a literary aesthetic that would reflect an American *and* a Black aesthetic, Douglas, too, moved away from the mainstream visual aesthetic in which he had trained and toward a visual language rooted in both American and African traditions. Harlem played its part in effecting this change, and Douglas's life's work reflects the period of more than a decade when New York was his primary home. Douglas had both a college degree and professional experience as a teacher when he stepped off the train in New York City in the summer of 1925. Early in life he seemed aware of his responsibilities as an example of achievement for others, and his mentors in Harlem encouraged him further along this path. An examination of Aaron Douglas in his early years provides a fuller context for understanding the mature artist, teacher, and leader he became.

Douglas's life began in the Midwest. He was born on May 26, 1899, in Topeka, Kansas, to Elizabeth Ross and Aaron Douglas (whose name he shared, though neither was ever listed as "Jr." or "Sr."). The hand-printed birth certificate registered that Elizabeth was 27 years old at the time of birth and that she originally came from Oplaka (perhaps a misspelling of Opelika), Alabama. The 49-year-old father was born in Snatch, Tennessee, just outside Nashville.² Douglas's parents were migrants drawn to Topeka, which as I will note more fully below, had become a magnet for late-nineteenth-century Blacks from the upper South seeking greater opportunities.

Like many migrants, the artist's parents appear to have had little formal education or professional skills. One account referred to Douglas's father as working in a bakery, and he consistently appeared in Topeka directory listings as a "laborer." Douglas recalled that his mother "took in work and she also went out to work." He remembered that one of the families she worked for was the Mulvanes, who in 1922 funded an art museum on the campus of then Washburn College in Topeka, and who once sent her home with a magazine that had a reproduction of a painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner (Figure 1.2). In a conversation with artist/historian Romare Bearden, Douglas surmised "'My mother must have talked to them about me because one day

² Atlases and post office listings from 1850, the approximate date of Aaron Douglas's birth, do not list "Snatch" as a community in Tennessee. However, the junior Douglas's niece, Constance Sawyer, recalls that the elder Douglas came from the vicinity of Nashville, Tennessee. Author interview with Constance Sawyer, February 6, 1999, Topeka, Kansas.

she came home with a magazine that they had given her. It had in it a reproduction of a painting by Tanner." Douglas recalled, "It was his painting of Christ and Nicodemus meeting in the moonlight on a rooftop. I remember the painting very well. I spent hours poring over it, and that helped to lead me to deciding to become an artist."³ Douglas's mother continued to nurture his interest and talent in drawing during his early years, and the artist remembered her hanging up his drawings and paintings in their home.



Figure 1.2: Henry O. Tanner, *Nicodemus*, 1899. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

³ Quoted in Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 127.

By his own account, however, Douglas's parents had limited direct influence on him. He once commented that by the time he reached high school he had "assumed all responsibility for all aspects of my life—meaning that I could thence forth to be [sic] as much a nobody as I wished. In other words I had to earn my own living."⁴ At the same time, his earliest observations of his parents' labor, as well as his own youthful experiences with menial work, laid a foundation for his lifelong appreciation for working-class folk. During high school, Douglas found employment at a local Topeka greenhouse. In the summer following graduation, he took a job in a Detroit auto foundry, in order "to earn enough money and fill in my background."⁵ This was followed by a stint sweeping and shoveling glass bits from the floor of the Essex Glass Factory in Dunkirk, New York, on the shores of Lake Erie. In addition, Douglas had to aid in the Saturday-night cleaning of the factory chimney, a dirty and dangerous task. "Having no skills whatever, I was obliged as usual to take the first job offered," he later recalled. "It was always my luck to get the roughest and poorest paying job wherever I was hired."⁶

Douglas put himself through the University of Nebraska in Lincoln by working as a dishwasher and busboy. In a telling description of the effort required to

⁴ Douglas, Untitled, Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, n.d., Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

⁵ Douglas, "Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 1–9, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

secure his college degree, Douglas recounted, "In 1922 after four anxious, sweaty, nerve-wracking years, I was awarded a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Nebraska. I had a sneaking suspicion that sweatiness was an unfamiliar thing to be associated with the acquisition of this degree. I would (of course) have very willingly omitted this unpleasant aspect had there ever appeared another way out." Yet, even as he suggested his desire to have skipped this facet of life, Douglas recognized the lasting impact of the experiences: "Fortunately, this experience proved to be the best possible training and orientation for the creation and interpretation of the life I was later called on to depict."⁷ Douglas, like Langston Hughes, drew from first-hand knowledge of working-class life in creating his art.

In a 1971 interview with Fisk University English professor Leslie Collins, Douglas responded to a question regarding the importance of the "man on the streets" to the Harlem Renaissance: "'As a matter of fact, if you had asked him about culture, he would have been hard-put to explain the black man's part in it. But he was a part of it, although he didn't understand this thing--he did not actually, consciously make a contribution; he made his contribution in an unconscious way. He was the thing on which and around which this whole idea was developed.'"⁸ Douglas's faith in the working class revealed his abiding agreement with Hughes's famous 1926 manifesto

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ Aaron Douglas, "Aaron Douglas Chats About the Harlem Renaissance," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 119. Aaron Douglas Interview, L. M. Collins, July 16, 1971, Black Oral Histories, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville.

on art published in *The Nation*. Hughes suggested that "the low-down folks, the so-called common element" offered "a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization." Hughes specifically cited Aaron Douglas as an exemplar, "drawing strange black fantasies [that] cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty."⁹ Soon after that essay appeared Hughes and Douglas collaborated on a number of projects, including a series of illustrated poems that appeared in the October 1926 issue of the National Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine and, in the following month, within the pages of *Fire!!* Douglas's developing style meshed well with the Hughes's evocation of a Black folk language.

Douglas drew on working-class sources for inspiration throughout his career. Yet his Topeka upbringing offered another stream of lasting influence as well: the Kansas capital city supported a thriving middle-class Black society in the years that Douglas grew up there. Historian Thomas C. Cox has described the spirit of social progressivism that infused both the white and Black communities, manifested in African American churches, schools, newspapers, and social clubs. "By 1890 the number of Black entrepreneurs in service to a Negro market increased. Among them were several groceries, barbers, salesmen, retailers, restaurateurs, two coal and grain

⁹ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, 23 June 1926.

dealers, a notary public, professional typist-stenographer, two printers, and three licensed real estate agents," Cox noted.¹⁰ Through the efforts of Reverend Charles M. Sheldon, the progressive leader of the white Central Congregational Church and author of best-selling novel, *In His Steps*, a kindergarten was opened in 1893 to serve Black children. The Black community also enthusiastically supported the Kansas Industrial and Educational Institute, which was modeled after Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. Topeka's Black leaders organized a number of philanthropic and political clubs, including a chapter of the National Negro Business League (NNBL) in the mid-1910s. "The NNBL was the most prominent agency for expanding Black Topeka's commercial interest and for expressing the doctrine of accommodationism," according to Cox.¹¹ This philosophy of advancing the Black community through separate and autonomous Black businesses had been advocated in Topeka's Black newspapers as early as 1893, and it was strengthened by a speech delivered during a visit by Washington in 1897.¹²

¹⁰ Thomas Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas 1865-1915: A Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹² *Ibid.*, 172-174. Cox argued that Black leaders in Topeka recognized the benefits of developing Black business even before Washington's 1897 visit. In 1893, Topeka Black newspaper *Evening Call* wrote, "Industry, education, commerce, and wealth [will] enable us to stand side by side on equal terms with whites" (173). Washington's call in his Topeka speech for "commercial development and organization to promote success in business" as "the best guarantor of Negro progress" served to solidify ideas already circulating among Black Topekans (174).

At the same time, some citizens resisted racial segregation in Topeka. By 1914, just five years after its national founding, they established the Topeka chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A year later, a successful protest by Black residents, with the support of some whites, led to banning the showing of the film *Birth of a Nation* in Topeka. The NAACP advocated civil and political rights in a public, confrontational way that Washington discouraged. Among the founders of the Topeka chapter was Douglas's future father-in-law, Nathaniel Sawyer. Nationally, the followers of Booker T. Washington and those of W. E. B. Du Bois, the outspoken editor of the NAACP's *Crisis* (and critic of Washington), were in conflict, but in Topeka the two philosophical stances converged.

Growing up in the midst of such social progressivism likely fueled Douglas's own career aspirations. That he continued his education past the segregated elementary schools and into Topeka High School set him apart. When Douglas graduated from Topeka High in 1917 he was one of only eight African Americans in his class. The education system in Topeka, though integrated at the high-school level, remained out of reach for most non-white children. Nevertheless, Douglas aspired early for education and higher achievement. He recounted that he "was an ardent reader of serious books throughout [his] elementary and high school years."¹³ He

¹³ Douglas, "Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 1, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

described how, after briefly considering the study of law, "I decided to follow a career in the fine arts and (eventually) became a painter. I had no notion of the hazards, risks, disappointments, and defeats associated with this almost uncharted way of life."¹⁴ Although less-determined students might have been discouraged by the slim chances for Blacks, Douglas was inspired to attend high school and pursue a career that was almost unthinkable for an African American in the early years of the twentieth century.

His inspiration, in part, came from the growing value placed on the arts. Mainstream and Black newspapers alike reported on the organization and attendance of a number of social and cultural clubs. For example, the *Topeka Plaindealer*, a newspaper initiated by local Black businessman Nick Chiles in 1899, regularly covered accounts of Black Topeka clubs such as the Oriental Art Club and the Dumas Art and Literature Club. The paper also published weekly comments on events in communities throughout the state, including Lawrence, Leavenworth, and Kansas City. It reported graduation parties and educational and cultural events like poetry readings and art exhibitions.

The training Douglas received through both his high school and college studies was quite traditional, reflecting the white mainstream of midwestern aesthetic sensibility. "At Topeka High School . . . my teachers were excellent, interested, and helpful," he recalled. "All were caucasion [sic]. By this time I had learned to

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

transform most handicaps into springboards."¹⁵ Here Douglas hints at some of the obstacles he faced as a young Black man preparing for a career for which he had perhaps only one role model: Henry O. Tanner, whose work he had seen reproduced in a magazine as a boy. During his high school years Douglas focused on his drafting skills, taking special pleasure in mastering the human form. His signed works from these years reflect this early interest in line-work. He created the cover art for two of the school's yearbooks in June 1915 and June 1917, respectively. Each cover depicts a sunflower, the given name of the Topeka High annual. The earlier image seems more traditional stylistically, reflecting, perhaps, his early grasp of illustrative techniques (Figure 1.3). The sunflower created two years later, in contrast, looks more stylized (Figure 1.4). The colors and the line-work in the later image are stronger and flatter, a stylistic trait that he repeated in his later murals.

¹⁵ Douglas, Untitled, Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, n.d., Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

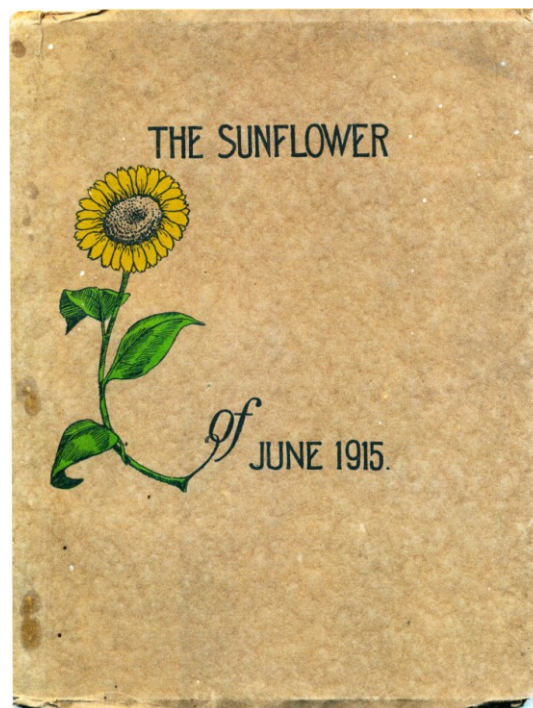


Figure 1.3: Aaron Douglas, cover for the *Sunflower*, the Topeka High School yearbook, 1915.



Figure 1.4: Aaron Douglas, cover for the *Sunflower*, Topeka High School yearbook, 1917.

Douglas seemed more interested in working with the stylization of the sunflower image on the 1917 cover in comparison to the earlier attempt at a more representative likeness. The palette of the later sunflower consists of deep yellow petals with a black center and black lettering. The lettering appears to be hand-drawn rather than type-set, and it encircles and repeats the flattened oval shape of the sunflower. The sunflower petals radiate out from the center in different-sized segments that fit together neatly to create an oval. This is all reproduced on an oatmeal-colored background stock that gives the yearbook the overall sense of a handmade object.

Especially when compared to Douglas's earlier effort, this cover reflects an awareness of contemporary design trends. One possible source of stylistic inspiration can be traced to the Arts and Crafts movement, which emphasized strong pattern and design, along with earth-toned hues, in household items such as furniture, pottery, and wallpaper. This represented a turn away from the popularity of the bright, busy floral prints popularized by William Morris and favored in American Victorian-style homes. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright and furniture-maker Gustav Stickley set the tone for the design trend that encouraged the integration of beauty and function in homes and furnishings for all economic levels.

Another image signed by Douglas is reproduced in a 1917 Topeka High newspaper article. The tiny illustration accompanied a short fictional story and depicts a young lady and her beau on a staircase (Figure 1.5). The figures are

rendered rather awkwardly in what appears to be a pen-and-ink sketch, with the descending female facing forward and the male figure with his back to the viewer, looking at the woman. The woman wears an ankle-length dress and the man is in a suit, which corresponds with photographs of the contemporary clothing of 1917 high-school students. This early image seems congruent with Douglas's interest in portraiture and the human figure throughout his life. It is, however, one of the few times that (apparently) white figures appear in his work.

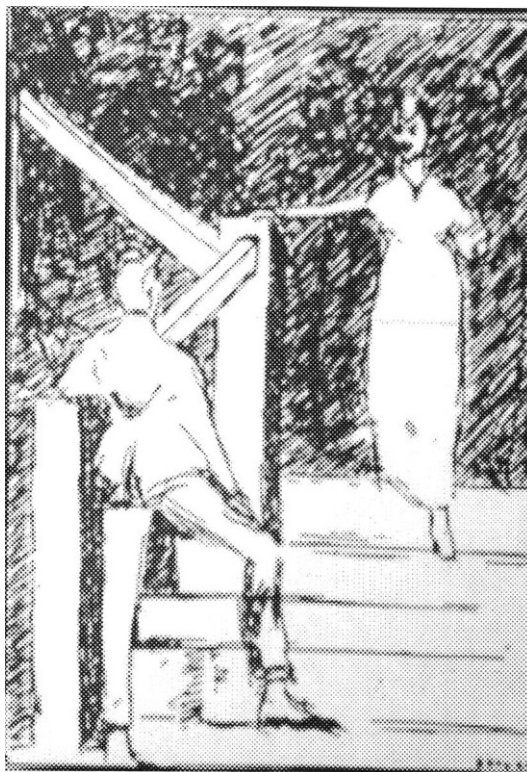


Figure 1.5: Aaron Douglas, illustration from Topeka High School *World*, May 11, 1917.

Even as a high-school student Douglas revealed a thoughtful, serious nature. His classmates recognized his aspiration to be an intellectual leader. In a 1917 high-school newspaper column titled "Who's Who," the anonymous author proclaimed Douglas a talent in drawing, poetry, and public speaking. The writer observed, "There's one funny thing about him, though. He reads heavy literature, pages and pages written by authors like Carlyle and Victor Hugo. He says he thinks a person should read such things to form a taste for good literature."¹⁶ Douglas confirmed this observation in later autobiographical notes. In describing the thrill that books by "serious" writers ("Emerson, Bacon, Montaigne, Hugo, Dumas, Shakespeare and Dante") brought him early in life, Douglas acknowledged, "Much that I read was far over my head; nevertheless, the mere reading of the works of these authors, aside from the joy of being transported to worlds far beyond my own narrow (poverty-stricken [*sic*]) environment brought me the realization that my background was too weak a foundation to support a meaningful college education."¹⁷ Nonetheless, by the spring semester of 1918, despite any misgivings about his preparation, Douglas arrived in Lincoln to begin his college education at the University of Nebraska.

As the first Black student admitted into the fine arts program at the University of Nebraska, Douglas continued his immersion in white mainstream aesthetic forms. Douglas used plaster casts as models because the University of Nebraska prohibited

¹⁶ Topeka High *World*, 11 May 1917.

¹⁷ Douglas, "Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 1, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

the use of live models. The young artist proved his competence during his first semester at the university by winning first prize for drawing. He also had an opportunity to study independently at the Walker Museum (now the Walker Art Center) in Minneapolis during the summer of 1918, when, with World War I at its height, he volunteered for the Student Army Training Corps at the University of Minnesota. "Before returning to Lincoln for the second semester," recounted Douglas, "I spent several weeks in the library of the Walker Museum copying and trying to grasp something of the form, technique and proportions of Leonardo da Vinci's masterful drawings."¹⁸ Thus, Douglas's formal art education came through a traditional study of European masters.

Although his formal training centered on mainstream forms, during his college years Douglas became a regular reader of the NAACP's monthly, *The Crisis*, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois, and of the National Urban League's *Opportunity*, edited by Charles S. Johnson. The magazines offered him a glimpse of what *Black* artists might do: "The poems and other creative works were *by* Negroes and *about* Negroes. And in the case of one poet, Langston Hughes, they seemed to have been created in a form and technique that was in some way consonant or harmonious with the ebb and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-9. Aaron Douglas served throughout the summer of 1918, until the signing of the armistice in November brought World War I to a close and prompted his honorable discharge. Amy Helene Kirschke, in her book *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), described the racism in Lincoln that caused Douglas to enlist in another state in the summer following his first semester at the University of Nebraska. See pages 7–8 for more on this.

flow of Negro life."¹⁹ As Douglas noted, he was becoming familiar with the work of several writers who, in a few years, would become his friends, colleagues, and mentors in Harlem. Already, Douglas had begun to follow a steady path in this life: from a world largely shaped by white mainstream values and aesthetics toward one increasingly defined by the blossoming Black cultural boom of the 1920s and 1930s.

Douglas's two-year teaching stint at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri, highlights this cultural transition. In correspondence with Alta Sawyer, whom he later married, Douglas provided a look into the years before he moved to Harlem in 1925. In letters written while he taught art classes in Kansas City (1923–1925), Douglas often described the experiences of mutual friends. He filled his life, beyond his teaching duties, with dances and other social events as part of an active African American community in Kansas City. He referred to local newspaper columns on the activities of the many area fraternities, sororities, and other cultural organizations. *The Kansas City Call*, one of the largest-circulation Black newspapers in the country, prided itself on reporting notable events in the Black community, and the activities of the young, educated teachers on the campus of the prestigious Kansas City high school would certainly have interested the newspaper's readers. Despite the qualms Douglas expressed in moving away from his art as a full-time vocation, the position at Lincoln High School gave him entrée into the world of the Black middle

¹⁹ Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance," written for the Fisk University Negro Culture Workshop, March 18, 1973, Reel 1, Box 3, File 2, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

class. While in Kansas City, he met Ethel Ray Nance, secretary for the National Urban League, and Eric Walrond, a writer originally from the West Indies, whose work regularly appeared in *Opportunity* in the 1920s. Both Nance and Walrond wrote Douglas encouraging him to join them in the Black cultural renaissance of Harlem, a move that Douglas finally was ready to make after reading the 1924 special issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine, edited by Alain Locke and devoted to chronicling the Harlem boom.

At the urging of her boss, Charles S. Johnson, Ethel Nance, in her correspondence with Douglas, had challenged him: "Better to be a dishwasher in New York than to be head of a high school in Kansas City."²⁰ Douglas arrived in Harlem with high hopes for his success, but, once again, found it difficult to make a living as an artist—even one who was eagerly received as an answer to prayers for more visual artists on the scene. His letters to Alta Sawyer are peppered with contradictory sentiments. On the one hand, he expressed confidence that he soon would be a successful artist; yet, on the other, he frequently described the struggle to survive in New York, even as he was kept busy with illustration work. In a letter written on Thanksgiving 1925, for example, he began, "I have passed one of the loneliest and sorriest of all the Thanksgivings of my life. I haven't had a cent of my own money for three weeks. How did I live? Well, sweetheart," he wrote Alta Sawyer, "my two

²⁰ Ethel Ray Nance transcript, Fisk Oral History Program, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tenn., 25–26. Quoted in David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981; reprint New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 96–97.

friends Emanuel Pomerantz and Eric Walrond have kept my head above water. They have been brothers to me in the truest sense of the word." Yet Douglas continued in his lengthy letter by describing the many opportunities that had opened up for him in the five months since he had arrived in Harlem, finally concluding: "You just watch. Things are going to break and break fast."²¹

Another sentiment, too, appeared in these personal letters: a growing Black consciousness. While Douglas clearly valued the friendship and mentoring of such white men as Pomerantz (who Douglas described in the Thanksgiving letter as "the most 'un-white' white man that I have ever known") and the Bavarian artist Winold Reiss (who gave Douglas a full scholarship to his art school upon his arrival in Harlem), he expressed his growing recognition of the chasm between the Black and white worlds.²² In an undated letter written sometime after Christmas 1925, he proclaimed,

At my present rate of progress I'll be a giant in two years. I want to be frightful to look at. A veritable black terror. They (White America) believe that a black artist is impossible. They have good grounds for their belief. Most of us are utterly despicable. Most of us feel that we have reached the heights when we have depicted their chalky faces and

²¹ Aaron Douglas to Alta Sawyer, Aaron Douglas Papers, Folder 1, Letter 8, dated Thanksgiving 1925, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

²² Reiss's role in the fruition of the New Negro visual aesthetic is significant. Alain Locke recruited him to create many of the illustrations for the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic* that helped persuade Douglas to move to Harlem. Reiss and Douglas created the illustrations for the book *The New Negro*. For a fuller treatment on the connection between Reiss and Douglas, see Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 59–64.

disgusting sentimentality or filled yards of canvas with feeble imitations of their second rate "little masters."²³

Douglas by this time clearly had situated himself within the camp that encouraged him to draw from the beauty of the Black community that surrounded him, rather than attempting to imitate the "second rate" white art traditions in which he had earlier been steeped.

One prevailing attitude of the modern 1920s was that the industrial boom of the late-nineteenth century paved the way for a new generation of spiritless automatons. Some white patrons, like Charlotte Osgood Mason, believed that African American culture offered a solution to the loss of spirit in society. Mason offered her support to Harlem artists who would follow her dictates, which tended toward stereotypical primitive visions of Black culture.²⁴ Douglas transformed such notions into a reflection on his growing racial consciousness: "I am, however, beginning to realize how good it is to be black. Otherwise this awful grinding gristmill of mediocrity would long ago have devoured us. As it is we are free to think, to feel, to play with life, to enjoy life. Our white brother is sick. Spiritually

²³ Douglas to Alta Sawyer, Douglas Papers, Folder 2, Letter 13, n.d., Schomburg Center.

²⁴ Douglas, briefly, accepted Mason's financial support. He soon wearied, however, of her constant meddling and rejected her aid. Other artists, notably Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and Alain Locke, maintained longer ties with the wealthy patron, even as they, too, found her guidelines restrictive. See Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 151-155. See also Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 35-37.

sick. Sick unto death. He spoils everything he touches."²⁵ Douglas assured Alta that his growing Black pride had not turned toward hatred for whites, but he did suggest some pity toward them, writing, "They are so impossible."²⁶

With this attitude in mind he must have welcomed the exhortations from his artistic mentor, Winold Reiss, to look within himself to capture the beauty of his own community. Further support came from the pen of Alain Locke, the self-proclaimed midwife of the Harlem Renaissance, who coached the new generation of artists to draw from their African *and* American roots in forging a vital new American aesthetic. In the 1924 issue of *Survey Graphic* that Douglas had found so important, both Locke and the white philanthropist Albert C. Barnes extolled the significance of looking toward African art, a move that had currency among European modernists of the day.²⁷

²⁵Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 35-37.

²⁶ Douglas to Alta Sawyer, Douglas Papers, Folder 2, Letter 13, Schomburg Center.

²⁷ Although he never got to know Albert Barnes well, Douglas did have the opportunity to study first hand his collection when he and visual artist and poet Gwendolyn Bennett received fellowships through the Barnes Foundation in 1927. Amy Kirschke writes that Douglas's relationship with Barnes became strained when Barnes asked Douglas and Bennett, the only Black students who had received entry to the Barnes collection, to "write a statement or essay attacking Alain Locke" for his supposed plagiarism of Barnes's work. Barnes was unhappy that Locke, in *The New Negro*, had challenged some of Barnes's ideas in an essay, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," that appeared immediately after Barnes's own essay on African art. Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 108-109. In public comments on those experiences offered in the 1970s, Douglas remembered the eccentric millionaire as someone who "wrote with greater penetration and insight about the art of the modern world than any critic of our times." And, at one of the Barnes Foundation lectures he recalled "the great pleasure of shaking hands with two of the greatest philosophers of our

Paralleling the development of a new Black American visual aesthetic was Douglas's growth as a leader. The young Douglas focused on social networking and personal success in his first year in Harlem, but he increasingly took on the mantle of Black public leadership in his later years there, and continued to do so in his long career at Fisk University.

Douglas had the opportunity to learn from the generation of leaders who shaped the start of the twentieth century, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson. Du Bois stands out as the pivotal figure. Du Bois had already accomplished much by the time Douglas met him. A Harvard Ph.D. and an original member of the American Negro Academy in 1897, Du Bois elaborated his notion of a "Talented Tenth" of Black leaders who would lead the community into a better life through education, protest, and participation in the American mainstream. Such ideals fueled the creation of the Niagara Movement in 1905 and, four years later in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Du Bois played a central role in the formation of both the NAACP, and its forerunner, The Niagara Movement, and in 1910, he was recruited to serve as Director of Publicity and Research as well as editor of *The Crisis*, the organization's primary publication. Du Bois found a job for Douglas in the mailroom

century—Bertrand Russell and John Dewey." He also shared his introduction at another Barnes lecture to the modernist Bulgarian painter Jules Pascin. Aaron Douglas, lecture notes for the Dillard University Scholars-Statesmen Lecture Series, "The Harlem Renaissance," n.d. (ca. 1974-75), Reel 3, Box 3, File 7, n.p., Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

of *The Crisis* soon after the young artist's arrival in Harlem, which initially helped him pay room and board. More important for Douglas's artistic career, *The Crisis* also utilized his illustration skills on the pages of the magazine.²⁸

Alain Locke, too, almost immediately bestowed his blessings on the young artist. Soon after Douglas's arrival in 1925, Locke commissioned him to create illustrations for *The New Negro*, an expanded book version of the popular Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*. Like Du Bois, Locke was well educated—the first United States Black Rhodes Scholar—and well connected in both the Black and white cultural worlds. If Du Bois often focused primarily on the role of education in pulling America's darker-skinned citizens to equal standing, Locke believed that mainstream recognition of the artistic and cultural potential of African Americans would pave the path to racial equality.²⁹ Aaron Douglas and Langston Hughes were two of Locke's early foot soldiers in this effort.

More quietly than Du Bois or Locke, the sociologist Charles S. Johnson perhaps exerted the longest-lasting impact on Douglas. It was at Johnson's insistence that Ethel Ray Nance encouraged the artist's move to New York. From his helm at the Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine, Johnson, too, found illustrative work

²⁸ For the definitive study of the life of W. E. B. Du Bois see David Levering Lewis's two-volume *W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993-2000). See especially volume one, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, 161-174 and 387-427.

²⁹ On Alain Locke see Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 56-60.

almost immediately for Douglas. In addition, it was Johnson who, after gaining his position as the first Black president of Fisk University, recruited Douglas to develop the arts program there, a position that would last for more than three decades.³⁰

Johnson often worked behind the scenes making opportunities for others. Douglas described him as someone who "understood how to make the way, how to get the next step, how to indicate the next step for many of these younger people."³¹

Similarly, Douglas increasingly took on the role of behind-the-scenes mentor to a rising generation of artists. In New York, Douglas would serve as the first president of the Harlem Artist's Guild and a founding member of the American Artists' Congress. As president of the Harlem Artist's Guild, Douglas worked to gain access for other Black artists to some of the public art commissions that the New Deal created. He also occasionally offered his advice to students in Harlem art classes offered regularly by sculptor Augusta Savage.

In an address at a public session of the first meeting of the American Artists' Congress, organized in 1936, Douglas articulated his commitment to the betterment of his community. While falling in line with the other delegates in presenting a united front against fascism and the horrors observed in the war raging in Spain, Douglas pointedly suggested the need for improvement at home: "In America, race discrimination is one of the chief props on which Fascism can be built. One of the

³⁰ For more on the significance of Charles S. Johnson on the development of the Harlem Renaissance see Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 90–130.

³¹ Douglas, "Aaron Douglas Chats About the Harlem Renaissance," 125.

most vital blows the artists of this congress can deliver to the threat of Fascism is to refuse to discriminate against any man because of nationality, race, or creed."³²

Douglas had become a leading advocate for all African American artists.

By the late 1930s, Douglas had given up his attempts to make his living full time by selling his art. After all, he faced a still-racist art world that largely refused to recognize and patronize non-white artists with gallery and museum shows.³³ Like several of his Harlem colleagues, Douglas secured a faculty position at one of the nation's most prestigious Black institutions, where he was able to continue to develop his own art and, at the same time, pass along his experience to the next generations. His dedication to teaching is demonstrated both by the time he devoted to establishing a fine arts program at Fisk and by his decision to earn his MA degree in education from Teacher's College in New York in the early 1940s. His life's journey had come full circle as he returned to teaching and mentoring. Douglas had traded the singular pursuit of artistic success for the goal of educating Black youth.

³² Aaron Douglas, "The Negro in American Culture," delivered at the First Artists' Congress, February 14–16, 1936, and reprinted in *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Congress*, ed. Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 84.

³³ A rare exception to this was the 1941 showing at the Downtown Gallery of young Jacob Lawrence's migration series. Previously, in 1937, William Edmondson, a self-taught stonecutter from Nashville, received a one-man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



Figure 2.1: Aaron Douglas, left, with Arthur A. Schomburg discussing *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, 1934. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Chapter Two Tides of Change

Within a few years of moving to Harlem, Aaron Douglas established himself as a leading visual artist of Black life. After a year or so of economic struggles, Douglas had secured a steady salary through a position on *Crisis*, the NAACP's increasingly popular magazine, and he had added to his artistic training through scholarships that provided access to the art school of Winold Reiss, in 1925, and to

the Albert Barnes collection of African and modern European art, in 1928. He also added to his income by garnering a steady stream of commissions for illustrations and book covers. Feeling a bit more financially secure, in June 1926, he convinced his sweetheart, Alta Mae Sawyer, to join him in New York, where they were married.¹ His recognition in the community soared, and with Alta by his side, the couple took up positions as social leaders. Artistic mentors like the German illustrator Winold Reiss and Howard University scholar Alain Locke encouraged him to explore African art in order to develop a new, modern aesthetic that would appropriately convey the New Negro message. Douglas did so, surpassing even Reiss in the development of what would become his signature style, especially in his murals of the 1930s.

Douglas found other influences in his New York environment as well. In this large, urban setting he and Alta involved themselves regularly in both social and political events. In Harlem, the two were often intertwined, and, increasingly, Aaron and Alta Douglas could be found taking leadership roles. These activities shaped Douglas's views about pressing social issues, and, in turn, shaped his artistic work. His move to the political left coincided with his growing racial consciousness. Throughout the later years of the 1920s, Douglas accepted commissions for projects aimed at both Black and white audiences. His focus, however, steadily turned toward racial issues, and by the mid-1930s—for a variety of reasons—his target audience

¹ A notice of the wedding appeared in the *New York Amsterdam News* on 30 June 1926, 11. A list of Aaron Douglas's early illustrative accomplishments is included in the notice.

was largely Black, even as his murals appeared in public spaces frequented by racially mixed audiences. While he never expressed animosity toward whites, he did move more deeply into a largely segregated Black world as the 1920s decade of hope and optimism was replaced by the 1930s decade of fear and struggle. With a change in times, and his own maturing attitudes, Douglas willingly took on the mantle of leadership, becoming a mentor to a rising generation of artists in Harlem and elsewhere.

In taking on a leadership role among Black artists, Douglas emerged as a public intellectual and race leader. Black migration, the rise of new urban centers in the North, the ascendancy of an educated "talented tenth," the new means of communication through the mass circulation newspapers and journals like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and the little magazines, and the flourishing of the cultural renaissance of the 1920s and after, all facilitated a new public discourse on the role of art in society. Such discussions raised related issues of the role of the artist and the necessity of patronage; the parameters for the discourse, moreover, shifted with the changing social, economic, and political climate.

Aaron Douglas was among the first generation of African Americans who received encouragement to pursue a career in art. He, along with Archibald Motley in Chicago, Hale Woodruff in Indianapolis, Laura Wheeler Waring in Philadelphia, Sargent Johnson in San Francisco, James Lesesne Wells in Washington, D.C., and others, comprised a group who benefited from the fights waged by earlier Black

leaders for higher education opportunities for Black Americans. Most, like Douglas, were college educated, and many eventually settled into teaching careers at Black colleges, providing the necessary experience for the development of visual arts programs at the institutions. Although this group had some predecessors to inspire them, they were the first generation that appeared in sufficient numbers to constitute a real presence.² Many, like Douglas, had roots outside the great urban centers to which they migrated in a pattern that echoed the general Black movement from the rural South or Midwest to the urban North. Once there, they found growing Black communities that supported their work through regular appearances in the Black newspapers and magazines, in the awarding of annual art prizes, and in helping artists cultivate ties with outside sources of patronage. While Harlem was not the only community that nurtured Black artists, it became the metaphorical center for the surge of Black cultural production.³

For Black artists in the 1920s, the question of the connections between art and social issues had different dimensions than for their white contemporaries. White artists of the post-World War I era often found the United States dull and lacking in dynamic cultural forces. They rejected the increasing materialism and mechanization

² See Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), especially 23-54.

³ *Ibid.*, 54. Powell here argues that the idea of the Harlem Renaissance "works best when removed from its regional connotations and is placed within the more inclusive concept of a metaphoric racial landscape, where this born-again black culture is realized in a range of art works, visual artists, and artistic meccas."

they saw as the United States moved into position as the dominant economic force in the world. Many, using the economic wealth garnered from the United States dominance, temporarily moved to Europe in an attempt to escape the modern condition.⁴ Some Black artists, too, took sanctuary in Europe in the same years, but mostly to escape the virulent racism they experienced in the United States, just as Henry O. Tanner had done in 1891.⁵ For most, however, changing circumstances in America offered some hope. In his historical study of Black intellectuals, William Banks observed, "Not yet having reached the promised land, few were prepared to abandon it. And many creative artists saw in black cultural life the vitality they craved."⁶ The modern conditions of growing economic stability and industrialization provided new opportunities for Black artists that differed from the needs of many white artists.

At the same time, Black artists were encouraged to comment upon social and political issues, including the growing materialism found among the rising Black middle class. W. E. B. Du Bois had long advocated the use of art as a source of cultural change. In his well-known 1903 publication *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du

⁴ Erika Doss, *Twentieth-Century American Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 75-77.

⁵ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 85-90. Although an illness in 1893 forced Tanner to return to the United States for a short time, he moved back permanently to Paris in 1894.

⁶ William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 81.

Bois used Black cultural production in the form of the spirituals and literature to provide a white audience a view of the Black American experience. Du Bois scholar Eric Sundquist explained how Du Bois integrated "mythology, literary allusion, passionate declamation, statistics, case studies, historical narrative, personal confession, and music" into a compelling examination of the "political and economic subordination of a great part of America's citizens."⁷ Du Bois believed that art was an integral part of the formula needed to foment change in American racial repression as well as other societal ills.

Du Bois also expressed concern about materialism that hindered Black leadership. In *Souls of Black Folk*, William Banks has argued, Du Bois "held up the example of African Americans as a people still relatively untouched by the soulless priorities of a spiritually bankrupt society."⁸ While such ideas sound idealistic today, Du Bois believed strongly at that time in the nurturing of a "talented tenth" who would rise from the masses and, through education and the inculcation of good moral training, break down negative stereotypes and lead the people to their rightful place in society. The goal for such leaders should not be personal gain but improvement for all. While Du Bois served as a strong voice advancing these ideas into the twentieth century, he propagated ideals that had long circulated through Black culture, especially through religion. Even under slavery, Black religious leaders favored

⁷ Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 98.

⁸ Banks, *Black Intellectuals*, 66.

stories of individual heroics, with moral rightness on their side, leading the masses to a better life. These early stories of faith continued to invigorate and motivate the exhortations of Black religious leaders and their communities in the continued fight against the pervasive racism in America.⁹ Thus, from the start, religion in Black America was necessarily intertwined with political and social meaning about group solidarity and activism. Artists, like others in leadership positions, were expected to serve the community, not just themselves.¹⁰ Art imbued with social meaning was an

⁹ Eddie Glaude, in his critical evaluation of the role of religion in the construction of Black nationalism, wrote that religion formed the basis for "an argument for (and about) the soul of America: it is a soul-craft politics." He offered the centrality of the Exodus--the story of freedom from bondage in Egypt and the collective march toward the promised land by God's chosen people—as "a metaphor for the conception of nation that begins with the common social heritage of slavery and the insult of discrimination . . . and evolves into a set of responses on the part of a people acting for themselves to alleviate their condition" (6-7). Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁰ In some ways, white American values followed similar paths early in the development of the nation. Neil Harris, in his history of white American artists, argued that art was legitimized in America only after artists and their supporters justified the role of art to pragmatic Americans more focused on nation-building in a literal sense. The labor involved in cultural production was seen of little value to those focused upon building up farms, settling new (to them) lands, and establishing towns. Eventually, artists found support among clergy, who tended to be better educated and have more leisure time than many other Americans, who enlisted art as one tool in the campaign to "improve the nation's manners and morals" 300. In exchange for patronage, many artists willingly embraced "the notion that art had an important contribution to make in the improvement of society, and that the artist's duty lay not to himself but to the republic" (298). In the years of prosperity (for some) following the Civil War, however, Harris points out, "The cultivation of the arts and the possession of masterpieces became just that private sort of act which the democratic patrons of the early nineteenth century hoped would disappear" (xiii). For white artists, the onus of social responsibility in their work was lessened as wealthier

expectation, even as Douglas and others of his generation embraced forms of modernism.

In the 1924 issue of *Survey Graphic* that had so heavily influenced Douglas's move to Harlem, editor Alain Locke placed the role of Negro artists front and center. In the issue introduction he surveyed Harlem and found the promise of a brighter future for Black Americans: "In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination," Locke asserted. In the next paragraph he further explained, "It is true the formidable centers of our race life, educational, industrial, financial, are not in Harlem, yet here, nevertheless, are the forces that make a group known and felt in the world. The reformers, the fighting advocates, the inner spokesmen, the poets, the artists and social prophets are here, and pouring in toward them are the fluid ambitious youth and pressing in upon them the migrant masses." Locke recognized the significance of the confluence of factors in Harlem that was creating a truly cosmopolitan Black city, and he recognized the importance of artists in making this known to the rest of the world. He likened the emergence of Harlem to "the stage of the pageant of contemporary Negro life." "In the drama of its new and progressive aspects," he predicted, "we may be witnessing the resurgence of a race; with our eyes focussed [*sic*] on the Harlem scene we may dramatically glimpse

individuals, more interested in demonstrating their newly acquired taste and cultured habits, replaced clergy as key patrons. Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years 1790-1860* (1966; reprint with a new preface, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

the New Negro."¹¹ By including more than a dozen portraits of Harlem residents by Winold Reiss and others, several Reiss drawings evoking the Harlem spirit, examples of Albert C. Barnes's African art collection, and numerous illustrative photographs, Locke indicated the importance of the visual element in the development of the New Negro character.

In another essay, written four years later for the short-lived magazine, *Harlem* (which featured a Douglas illustration on the cover of its single issue), Locke addressed the issue of "Art or Propaganda?" He poetically opened the essay by asking "Is this more the generation of the prophet or that of the poet; shall our intellectual and cultural leadership preach and exhort or sing?" His conciliatory answer: "I believe we are at that interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment." In this essay, Locke resolved—at least for himself—the seeming paradox that had become a battlefield among artists and critics in America. First Locke expressed disdain for the kind of propagandistic art that merely served as an unoriginal mouthpiece for a cause, which he admitted may have been true of some of the illustrations produced within the pages of the "three journals [*Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*] which have been vehicles of most of our artistic expressions." Yet, Locke argued, the free expression of artists drew from "a deep realization of the fundamental purpose of art and of its function as a tap root of vigorous, flourishing

¹¹ Alain Locke, "Harlem," *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925): 630.

living." Artists must be able to tap into the spirit of the people, he believed, in order to achieve something of real value. "It is the art of the people that needs to be cultivated, not the art of coteries," he wrote.¹² For Locke, the seeming conundrum of art for propaganda versus true creative expression found resolution through training artists who understood the true role of art flowing from and through the people it serves.

In fact, W. E. B. Du Bois had offered a similar resolution to the concern over the purpose of art even earlier in a 1926 *Crisis* editorial titled "Criteria of Negro Art." Du Bois, however, articulated his position even more forcefully. Like Locke, Du Bois drew from traditional Western philosophical ties between truth and beauty. The artist must first draw from truth, counseled Du Bois, "not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest hand-maid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding." Answering the mostly white critics who complained that Black artistic production was too political or reductive, Du Bois called them on their racialized judgment:

The apostle of beauty thus becomes the apostle of truth and right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by truth and justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the truth or recognize an ideal of justice.

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art

¹² Alain Locke, "Art or Propaganda," *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life* 1, no. 1 (1928). Reprinted in Nathan Irvin Huggins, ed., *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 312-13.

I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.¹³

This statement of Du Bois's position on the proper role of art as a form of propaganda is often cited. What is frequently overlooked in accusations that he believed that art only served such a function, however, is the perspective from which he and other Black leaders observed the American situation. For them, the overarching concern for *all* Black Americans had to be attainment of an equal place in society. To ignore this factor in their work would be to render Black artists "stripped and silent."

Aaron Douglas arrived in Harlem voicing the kind of youthful enthusiasm for personal success that could be expected from a man who was already breaking new ground for future African American artists. As he shared with Alta Sawyer in letters soon after arriving in Harlem, he expected for things "to break and break fast."¹⁴ He had already found some measure of recognition in the mainstream settings of his high school and in his days as an art student at the University of Nebraska. In addition, he had secured a good job as an art instructor with the potential for long-term employment at a prestigious Black high school, and then been wooed to Harlem with promises of future success through his drawing skills. He had every reason to be optimistic and bask in his own potential.

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis* 32 (October 1926). Reprinted in Sundquist, ed., *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 324-328.

¹⁴ Douglas, Box 1, Folder 1, Letter 8, Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center.

Yet, like many of the young artists who settled in Harlem in those years, the political and social environment transformed Douglas. Mentors like Locke and Du Bois, the sociologist Charles S. Johnson, and the elder statesman James Weldon Johnson exerted a powerful influence on his thinking, helping him realize that his personal success was intimately entangled within the larger framework of change in American attitudes toward race. During the pivotal fifteen or so years in Harlem (1925-1940), when Douglas matured, both as a person and as an artist, both his rhetoric and his visual work developed significantly. He increasingly believed in the power and significance of Black history and of Black people. At the same time, he took on a growing involvement in his community, first in Harlem, and eventually in Nashville, Tennessee, where he would divide his time as a teacher at Fisk University.

Almost as soon as he stepped off the train in New York City, Douglas found work creating cover artwork and illustrations to accompany stories and poetry for the most important publications in Black America of the time. His earliest illustrations resonated with the content of the prose they accompanied but also reflected his own vision. Douglas proved a willing student in following the call of his teacher Winold Reiss to look to his African ancestry for materials to fuel the aesthetic development of his art. Illustrations from his first months in Harlem reflect Douglas's attempts to put Reiss's advice to work while employing some of the elder artist's own visual devices for doing so. A December 1925 cover illustration for *Opportunity*, for instance, shows a profile image of a Black man that uses techniques similar to those of Reiss

(Figure 2.3). The head and shoulders have visually been reduced to simple line-work, emphasized by two lighter highlighting strokes. The inky blackness of the profiled face is relieved only by the white triangle forming an eye, two curves indicating the nostrils, and the full, rounded, lighter-toned lips. The same facial formula can be discerned in a number of Reiss's illustrations of the Negro scene, such as those reproduced in the March 1925 edition of *Survey Graphic* to illustrate J. A. Rogers's story of jazz music (Figure 2.2). These images retain an almost-minstrel like quality, in the stark contrasts of dark and light, and in the exaggerated effect of the lips, though likely this was not the intention of either artist. In fact, Reiss's portraits that appeared in the pages of that issue of *Survey Graphic* and elsewhere were widely praised for their sensitive, perceptive, and realistic renderings of his sitters. The cover illustration, rather, reflects Reiss's influence on Douglas; in his first few months in Harlem, he drew from the formula of his artistic mentor as a starting place for his own aesthetic development. These images transcend some of the formulaic minstrel-like qualities as they express an empathy that draws in potential Black viewers to seeing themselves represented in print.



Figure 2.2: Winold Reiss, *Harlem at Night*, 1924 Collection of Relate Reiss.

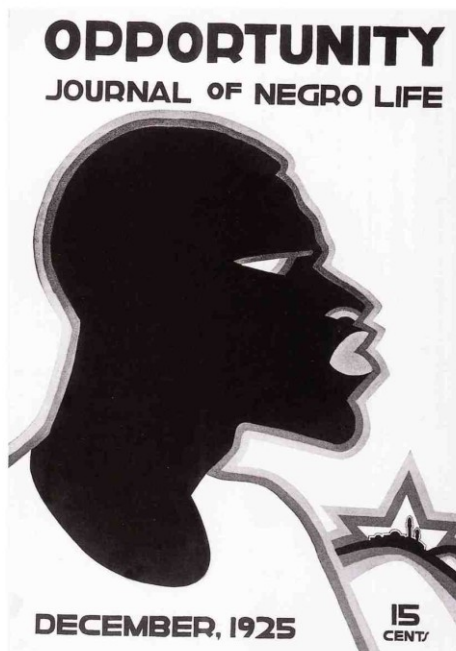


Figure 2.3: Aaron Douglas, Cover for *Opportunity*, December 1925, Yale Collection of American Literature, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

By 1927, when Douglas visually brought to life James Weldon Johnson's classic book of poetic sermons, *God's Trombones*, his own artistic formula had already moved beyond that of Winold Reiss, in terms of the development of a personal visual language for expressing a Black American experience. Even as he continued to develop his artistic language, he increasingly took to heart the admonitions and exhortations of the cadre of Black leaders who surrounded him to take his place in the efforts to advance the racial progress of his people. Douglas's participation in the creation of *Fire!!* in 1926 can be understood as a significant step for Douglas toward this end, despite the criticism of the publication rendered by some of the more politically conservative older guard.

As Martha Jane Nadell points out in her 2004 study, *Enter the New Negro: Images of Race in American Culture*, artists of all kinds were redefining the representations of African Americans. As she discusses, the arts—written and visual—were recognized as key components in a campaign to move American notions away from the "Old Negro" and toward the "New Negro." The image of the "Old Negro" was outdated, inaccurate, and a source of continuing oppression. In a 1924 article, *Vanity Fair* defined the Old Negro as "the Coloured Crooner of Lullabys, the Cotton-Picker, the Mammy Singer and the Darky Banjo-Player." A year later in the March issue of *Survey Graphic*, Alain Locke also identified the old, damaging stereotypes. "In 'Enter the New Negro,'" Nadel writes, "Locke likewise bid goodbye to 'aunties,' 'uncles,' 'mammies,' 'Uncle Tom,' and 'Sambo'—actors in a

'popular melodrama' that had 'played itself out.' It was time, Locke argued, 'to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts.'"¹⁵ The old representations seemed fairly easy to define, at least for Black leaders, who could draw from the bountiful supply of demeaning racial caricatures and stereotypes that freely circulated in American popular culture. Finding the right parameters for a "New Negro," however, proved a bit more challenging.

While some consensus existed on the importance of creating new images to replace the powerful old ones that had largely defined Black (and other non-white) Americans since its founding as a nation, no one had yet come forward with the proper formula. In 1926 W. E. B. Du Bois devised a questionnaire on the topic of "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" which he sent out for response to a variety of cultural leaders, Black and white. Du Bois published responses as an ongoing series in *The Crisis* throughout the year. Of course, the responses reflected the diversity of the respondents. Some argued for the necessity of offering only positive racial representations to offset the damage brought by decades of negative images, while others railed against such restrictions in the creation of art. Even when agreement was reached about the need for positive imagery, the sources and

¹⁵ Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10. Nadell refers to Eric Walrond and Miguel Covarrubias (two men who had an early impact on Douglas), "Enter the New Negro, a Distinctive Type Recently Created by the Coloured Cabaret Belt in New York," *Vanity Fair* (December 1924): 61-62, and Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," *Survey Graphic* 6, no. 6 (1925): 631.

depictions of such portrayals was open to debate and discussion. Even without consensus, however, the discussion broached in the pages of *The Crisis* and elsewhere provided a healthy public forum for raising awareness among the Black readership of cultural efforts in breaking down the old stereotypes. And, as Nadell suggests, "Magazines constituted a major source of publicity for African American writers and artists" ¹⁶ The artists who collaborated on the single published issue of *Fire!!* took to heart such examples and attempted to address the important issues of race and representation in their own ways.

The publication of *Fire!!* represented a significant moment in the collaboration and achievement for the younger artists involved. For Aaron Douglas, moreover, it stands as a critical step in his rise as a significant voice in the Black community. While Wallace Thurman served as the publication editor, Aaron Douglas provided additional leadership for the magazine. In the summer of 1926, the contributors met on "sweltering summer evenings" in the apartment of the newly married Aaron and Alta Sawyer Douglas to plan. Contributor Langston Hughes, in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, recalled that the name was chosen with:

the idea being that it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, *épater le bourgeois* into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing, the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and the

¹⁶ Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, 68-69.

Messenger—the first two being house organs of inter-racial organizations, and the latter being God knows what.¹⁷

For Hughes, the magazine represented an opportunity for Black artists to say what they wanted to say, in the manner that they chose, without interference from either the Black or white intelligentsia. Aaron Douglas agreed.

In a statement handwritten on publication letterhead that he had designed, Douglas declared the purpose of *Fire!!* (Figure 2.4). In manifesto style, Douglas set up a series of statements:

We are all under thirty.
 We have no get-rich-quick-complexes.
 We espouse no new theories of racial advancement, socially,
 economically or politically.
 We have no axes to grind.
 We are group conscious.
 We are primarily and intensely devoted to art.
 We believe that the Negro is fundamentally, essentially different from
 their Nordic neighbors.
 We are proud of that difference.
 We believe these differences to be greater spiritual endowment, greater
 sensitivity, greater power for artistic expression and appreciation.
 We believe Negro art should be trained and developed rather than
 capitalized and exploited.
 We believe finally that Negro art with out Negro patronage is an
 impossibility. (It's true that the extraordinary rise of Negro music
 and light drama is due largely to non-Negro patronage. But this
 rise has been an increase of volume rather than quality. In other
 words the great demand by white America for Negro entertainment
 both musical and dramatic has out run or rather precluded any
 attempt or demand to widen and deepen his sense of artistic
 expression. Popular American taste lacks discrimination and
 refinement. If there is any one thing more than another that we ask

¹⁷ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; reprint with introduction by Arnold Rampersad, New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 235-36.

of our friends it is that they remove their Nordic (White folks) spectacles before they criticize or even praise our work.¹⁸

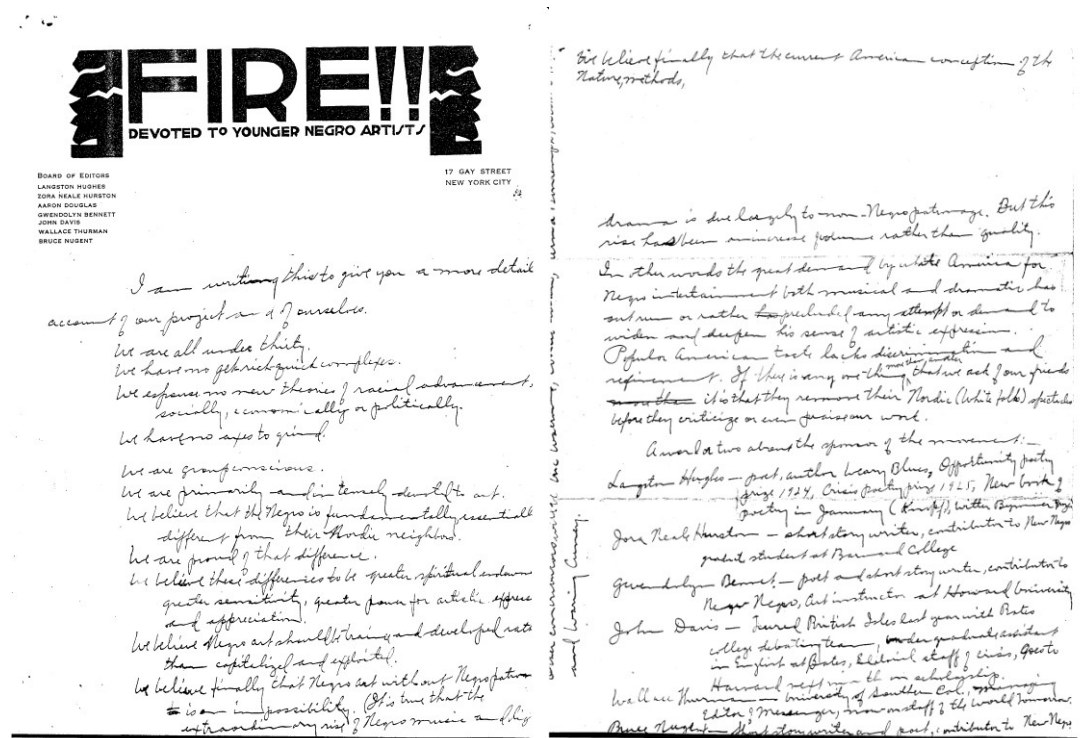


Figure 2.4: Reproduction of pages written by Aaron Douglas on stationery created for *Fire!!*, 1926, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

Douglas continued the two-page letter with brief biographies of contributors Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, John Davis, Wallace Thurman, and [Richard] Bruce Nugent (who is listed in the publication as Richard Bruce). Scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin convincingly argued that Douglas's images in *Fire!!* act as a visual response to the call for an authentic Black art that Langston

¹⁸ Douglas, Box 1, Folder 9, Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center.

Hughes had put forth in the pages of *The Nation* in that summer of 1926.¹⁹ Douglas's undated manuscript for *Fire!!* served as his written endorsement of Hughes's manifesto.

The lasting importance for Douglas of the collaborative effort is evident in his later reflections. In an oral interview, Douglas recalled that "putting out a magazine was, well, just fantastic. I mean fantastic that we could only put out the whole of Negro life." Remembering the disapproval garnered from the Black bourgeoisie, Douglas proudly asserted, "It was outrageous, outlandish and everything else for us to do that. . . . [W]ell, certainly we thought that was the greatest thing."²⁰ For Douglas, participation in *Fire!!* marked not only an artistic achievement, but also his growing significance as an African American artistic leader and advocate and public intellectual. In the decade that followed the publication of *Fire!!*, Douglas would advance even further.

The closing years of the 1920s and the early 1930s witnessed Douglas's artistic coming of age. During these years, he worked steadily and achieved national attention. While the public mural and illustration commissions that he obtained did not make him wealthy, they did provide him and Alta a steady income with

¹⁹ Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Aaron Douglas and the Literary Luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance," a talk presented at the conference on Aaron Douglas convened at the University of Kansas in conjunction with the opening of the Douglas retrospective exhibition, 29 September 2007.

²⁰ Interview of Aaron Douglas by L. M. Collins, July 16, 1971. Black Oral Histories, Fisk University.

opportunities to travel around the country and be among the comfortable Black middle class. In 1927 W. E. B. Du Bois promoted Douglas from his job in the mailroom to a position as art critic for the *Crisis*. In the same year, Douglas drew accolades for his illustrations in James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, which was favorably reviewed in the mainstream weekly *Time*.²¹ His success led to more book cover commissions while he continued a steady stream of illustrations for the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and other New York-based magazines. In addition, he completed his first public mural work in the ritzy new Club Ebony in Harlem.

The next couple of years proved equally as satisfying. In 1929 he agreed to paint a mural series for the new Fisk University campus library, a project that he began in the spring of 1930 (Figures 2.5-2.7). During summer 1930 he divided his time between the large Fisk project in Nashville and another new mural commission in Chicago, for the Sherman Hotel. With the help of Edwin Harleston (1882-1931), a painter originally from South Carolina, Douglas completed both commissions to overwhelmingly positive reviews, and he finished one more mural, at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1931.

²¹ "Trombones," *Time*, 6 June 1927, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,736779,00.html> accessed on 28 January 2008. The magazine article briefly commented on Aaron Douglas's contribution to the book: "Aaron Douglas, race futurist, contributes striking illustrations to *Trombones*—black figures in planes of primeval shade."

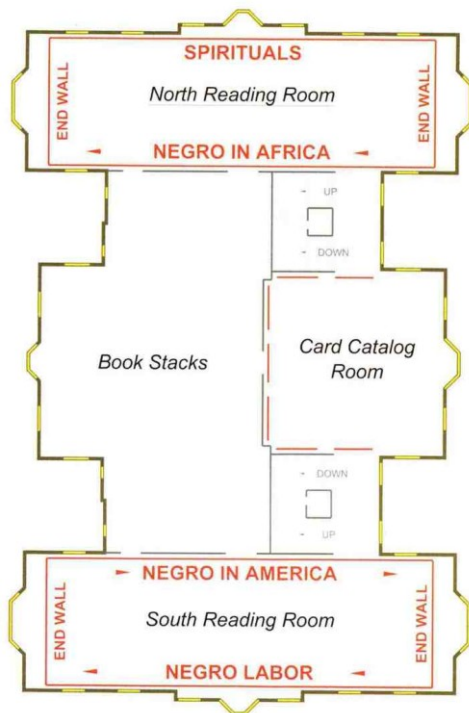


Figure 2.5: Map of locations of Douglas murals in Cravath Hall, Fisk University, Nashville



Figure 2.6: Murals in Card Catalog Room, Cravath Hall, from left to right: *Inspiration*, *Science*, *Night*.



Figure 2.7: *Negro in America*, 1930. South Reading Room of Cravath Hall, Fisk University, Nashville.

Throughout these years Douglas's reputation continued to rise both in the mainstream press and, especially, in the Black press. Yet while he grew as an artist and developed as a national figure, he still remained rooted in his midwestern, working-class origins. The attention did not seem to go to his head. Instead, it appears that Douglas took his work seriously and used it to engage in Black discourse in America. In particular, he used the mural commission as an opportunity to showcase the achievements of African Americans in a public setting.

A *New York Times* writer in 1931 reported on efforts at Fisk University to bring art to their campus. The anonymous reporter claimed Fisk "seems in process of becoming a veritable art centre in the South." The installation of Aaron Douglas's mural series in the school library constituted the largest example given. Echoing common notions of race progress among the liberal white press, the writer summarized the mural theme for readers as an "engrossing story of the Negro's climb upward from savagery and bondage." Yet Douglas's own words of description belie no such notions of early, uncivilized "savagery." Instead, regarding the themes, Douglas provided, "I have tried to show three things that have affected the Negro in his progress in this country: first, his religion; second, emancipation; third, his education."²² In fact, if the notion of religion is broadened to encompass ideas of original cultural development more widely, these three themes appear over and over

²² "Fisk University Becoming a Cultural Centre," *New York Times*, 13 September 1931, XX19.

again in Douglas's murals. They reflect his personal belief in the importance of freedom to make choices, the significance of education in opening opportunities previously closed, and the underlying recognition of ongoing achievement as seen in the unique developments in religion, music, and dance forms among Black Americans.

The Fisk murals offered the challenge of a large space, which Douglas appropriately used to promote deeply felt principles of racial progress. This project remained one of Douglas's favorites; art historian Amy Kirschke reported, "He said later that just looking at them made him so happy he was afraid they would dissolve."²³ Douglas maintained complete control over the murals' subject matter, as well as their style of execution, and he received the full support of Fisk president Thomas Elsa Jones, library architect Henry C. Hibbs, and Fisk University seniors when he unveiled sketches for the murals in June 1930.²⁴ Although Douglas had already completed a mural for Club Ebony in Harlem in the fall of 1927, the Fisk commission presented a much larger project that required help from four untrained assistants and the Charleston painter, Edwin Harleston.²⁵ Kirschke suggested that

²³ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, & the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 110.

²⁴ Amy Helene Kirschke, "The Fisk Murals Revealed: Memories of Africa, Hope for the Future," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 115.

²⁵ Amy Kirschke identifies the four helpers as Cornelius Lunceford, Preston Peterson, Julius Brown, and Andrew Foster. Kirschke, "The Fisk Murals Revealed," 116. According to a biography of Edwin Harleston by Maurine Akua McDaniel, Harleston

Douglas faced the project with some trepidation, writing that Douglas "suspected that some of the builders believed he would fall flat on his face, and he feared they might be right."²⁶ Douglas chose to produce the murals as large canvases that were attached to the walls, rather than working in frescos applied directly to the wall surface as Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera were doing at about the same time.²⁷

attempted to meet Aaron Douglas during a visit to New York City in 1930, but Douglas was on a visit to Kansas. Knowing of Douglas's recent commissions, Harleston, who was struggling to earn a living as an artist, wrote to Douglas offering his assistance. Douglas wrote back accepting his help in exchange for payment of \$300. The two artists worked together for long hours in a record-setting heat wave that hit Nashville in the late summer of 1930, and Harleston wrote home to his wife, Elise, expressing pleasure in the work and in gaining experience in mural painting. Following the completion of the murals in October 1930, Douglas wrote to Harleston thanking him for his contributions. "I don't know how I could have made it without your skill, your sound judgment and your helpful, friendly attitude," Douglas wrote (McDaniel, 261-262). Later in the year, Harleston painted a portrait of Aaron Douglas from a photograph he took while the pair worked together in Nashville, which Harleston subsequently entered in the 1930 Harmon Foundation Awards and Exhibition Competition (Figure 4.1). The two men continued to correspond until Harleston unexpectedly contracted pneumonia and died on March 10, 1931, at the age of 49. Maurine Akua McDaniel, "Edwin Augustus Harleston, portrait painter, 1882-1931," PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1994, 248-276.

²⁶ Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 110-111.

²⁷ I have found no evidence that Douglas looked to the example of Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros for guidance on how to approach his mural work. While it is likely that Douglas would have known their work through newspaper and magazine accounts, these men all visited the United States at about the same time that Douglas began his first mural projects. Rivera's first United States commissions, for instance, were in California in fall 1931, about the same time that Douglas unveiled his work at Fisk University. For more on the Mexican muralists see Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros* (New York: Chronicle Books, 1994).

Panels in the central room, which served as the card catalog repository, represent elements of education, including Philosophy, Drama, Inspiration, Music, Poetry, and Science (Figure 2.6). In these images, we find the development of Douglas's signature modern mural style, including Egyptian-inspired silhouetted figures and the radiating circles and arcs of light.

The *New York Times* article provided insight from Douglas on the attention he paid to technical aspects in the creation of the murals. First, Douglas spoke about the use of color and the concentric circles of light in his paintings. Second, he offered some insight into the development of the human forms. About light and color, Douglas described "'projecting a series of uniformly dark masses, ranging in tone from light to dark and in hue from vibrant yellows, oranges and reds to greens and blues.'" Light, explained Douglas, was not used in a naturalistic manner to illuminate the figures, but rather as a painterly technique to highlight and differentiate figures from the background. The murals "'are executed in a style that required a variation in the tonal masses of the figures included in the composition. This variation is achieved by changing the degree of light within progressively enlarging concentric circles, taking care always to maintain a constant relation between figure and background within each circle.'"²⁸

On the development of human forms, Douglas offered: "'The abstract and conventional treatment of the human figure which I have used in these decorations is

²⁸ "Fisk University Becoming a Cultural Centre," XX19.

rather largely a personal conception. This conception is influenced possibly by the Greek vase painters, primitive African sculpture and Egyptian bas-relief." This statement suggests that Douglas was comfortable drawing from both his Western training and from his more recent studies of African art in forming his own visual formula. He continued, "There is little use of anatomy, and what there is exists for functional and decorative purposes rather than for expression. Perspective is used to produce pattern rather than for the illusion of three-dimensional space."²⁹ The flattened and abstracted forms fulfilled his purpose here of using undifferentiated figures to tell a broader, rather than specific, story of Black progress and achievement.

We also find in the production of these murals a mature man who has ambitiously created the role of visual storyteller for Fisk students. This role becomes even more evident in the North and South Reading Rooms, whose walls hold what Douglas described as a "panorama of the development of Black people in this hemisphere, in the new world (Figure 2.7)."³⁰ The panorama begins in Africa, covers the story of spirituals, moves into America, and takes up the role of Negro labor in building the nation. "As a continuous narrative," Douglas scholar Amy Kirschke describes, "the paintings dramatically express the collective memory of Africa and pride in African culture and historical identity by depicting loss and,

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Interview of Douglas by Collins.

ultimately, survival and triumph."³¹ In these murals, Douglas emerges as the premier visual storyteller of African American life and history. Emphatically writing against long-held mainstream notions that Black Americans had little culture of their own and no significant history save that of a primitive, childlike race rescued from a dark, godless land, Douglas forcefully asserted a different narrative that he would repeat often in the years that followed.

Like the mural series at Fisk University, the mural Douglas created for Bennett College, at that time an all-female institution, highlighted Black American achievement gained through toil and despite overwhelming hardship. The subject of the mural was Harriet Tubman, the famous Underground Railroad leader who guided more than 300 people out of slavery in the South in the 1850s (Figure 2.8). In his 1931 portrayal of Tubman, Douglas paid homage to this female Black leader, who had died only around twenty years before. He presented Tubman as a powerful figure by centering and elevating her above those she leads out of bondage. A recently fired cannon next to Tubman emphasizes her pivotal role in the fight against slavery in the United States, while the smoke that rises from the cannon echoes her raised arms that tear apart the chains of bondage. Tubman appears bathed in a ray of light from the sky, and she shares the spotlight of Douglas's signature concentric circles of light with the smoking cannon, which serves to reinforce the connection.

³¹ Kirschke, "The Fisk Murals Revealed," 116.



Figure 2.8: Aaron Douglas, *Harriet Tubman*, 1931. Bennett College for Women Collection, Greensboro, North Carolina.

As in the Fisk murals, the artist chose to include several key themes of Black American life. These included the Great Migration from the South to the North, as shown by figures hunched over with backpacks trudging from the agricultural South toward the skyscrapers to the North; the contribution of agricultural workers, as witnessed by the figure bent over his work with hoe in hand; and the promise of a better future through education, personified by three female figures just to the right of Tubman, who seem to represent the stages of life from childhood, to adolescence (with book in hand), to adulthood. Once again, Douglas provides a history that reflects the trials and tribulations of African Americans, offers strong figures playing

a pivotal role in the nation's development, and suggests the central part that Black Americans will continue to play based on their own hard work in both labor and education. These themes typify the work Douglas produced within his best-known murals and illustrations--the public art that he created—in these years when both the artist and his art reached maturity.

Douglas took a break from his artistic production in the fall of 1931 to make his long delayed trip to Paris, France, for further training. He had stated from the moment he moved to Harlem that one goal was to visit France, which was considered almost a necessity for any serious American artist of the early twentieth century.³² By the time he had scraped together enough money to make the trip, however, Douglas had already adopted an attitude of seriousness about his work, one that was forged in the rhetoric of responsibility that surrounded him in Harlem, and that approach seemed to hinder the full appreciation of the Paris experience.

At first, Douglas was disappointed with Paris by "what seemed to be the worn, grey, bent appearance of the old capital." He initially enrolled in the Academie du Grand Chaumier, which required a more moderate tuition, Douglas explained, "but

³² In his unpublished autobiography, Douglas wrote, "I originally wanted to go to Paris to study, as this seemed to be the goal of every painter of my time; but when I reached New York that summer [1925], I was eventually persuaded to let down my bucket there. This decision was a correct one, as New York was 'where the action was' so far as the young Negro artist was concerned." Aaron Douglas, "An Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 11, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tenn. (microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

there was so little working space that I gave up and went over to the L'Academie Scandinave at the end of the first week." L'Academie Scandinave charged a higher tuition but provided "much more working space and an excellent staff of professors for both sculpture and painting."³³ Once settled into the city, Douglas "learned to love every weather-worn wall and cobbled street as well as the spectacular sparkle and glitter of this lovely old city."³⁴ While his ultimate school choice made him happier, the higher costs strained his limited budget and added to his sense that he must make use of every moment to its fullest.

While there, he had the chance to call upon the expatriate painter, Henry O. Tanner, whose work had inspired him as a boy in Topeka to take up art training. Yet, when offered an invitation to return to the elder artist's studio to learn more about his technique, Douglas did not take up the invitation, also mindful the he would have to miss some of the classes for which he had paid tuition. He later reflected on such missed opportunities with fellow artist Romare Bearden. "Today I would say that I didn't know how to study and work"; Douglas explained, "at that time I did it in the American way. I wanted to get my money's worth, and I worked it like I was laying brick." He continued, "Even when I came to recognize that what I was doing was wrong, I couldn't change it. It was my money and I was terrified that I would waste it Many years later I realized that at that time there simply wasn't any other way

³³ *Ibid.*, 16. Douglas named the sculptor Charles Despiau and the painter Othon Friesze as especially influential to his training in Paris.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

for me to study because that's the way I was at the time."³⁵ If Douglas approached his work in Paris like he "was laying brick," he redoubled his efforts when he returned to the States a year later.³⁶

After a year away, with the United States spiraling deeper and deeper into an economic depression, Douglas found his illustration and mural commissions had slowed. Black communities in the North were particularly hard hit. "[In] Cleveland, 50 percent of the Afro-American population had no jobs, and in Detroit and Saint Louis 60 percent," wrote historian David Levering Lewis. "In Harlem, median family income nose-dived 43.6 percent in less than three years."³⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois lost his

³⁵ Douglas to Romare Bearden published in Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 131. In his autobiography, Douglas declined to mention his single visit to Tanner's studio, but he wrote, "I realized that the time-clock, lock-step approach to art in any form was improper and ultimately self-defeating. I promised the 'Muses' though that if they could forgive me this one time I'd devote the rest of my life to the most earnest search for perfection and truth in my chosen field" ("Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 17, Douglas Papers, Fisk University).

³⁶ Romare Bearden offered a slightly different take on Douglas's missed opportunity for a second visit with Henry O. Tanner in a 1979 eulogy published in the *New York Amsterdam News*. After recognizing Douglas's life-long affinity for "American and African" history, he wrote, "Douglas said that Tanner wanted to acquaint him with his unique method of painting. Douglas, a modest man, did not feel that at that time he should be privy to such information. He later felt that even if he did not use the method himself, he should have learned ti [*sic*] to pass along for not only its practical worth, but, in addition, for whatever historical value it may have had in the understanding of Tanner's art." Romare Bearden, "A final farewell to Aaron Douglas," *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 February 1979, 65.

³⁷ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 240-41.

house and his insurance policy after refusing to draw his own salary from the *Crisis* for several months in order to keep the publication afloat.

In the years that followed Douglas's return to American soil in the fall of 1932 he resumed his role as an artistic and cultural leader in New York. In 1933 he accepted a commission to produce a mural for the Harlem YMCA, a major Harlem public institution. Once again Douglas chose to illustrate an aspect of African American life that he felt would demonstrate the long history and cultural significance of Black people in America (Figure 2.9).



Figure 2.9: Aaron Douglas, *Evolution of Negro Dance*, 1933. Harlem YMCA, New York City.

In *Evolution of Negro Dance*, he reprised some familiar motifs. The arched image is centered under a brightly shining sun from which emanate the concentric circles that highlight the action on the ground below. Two pairs of dancing figures,

dressed in high style, share center stage; the man on the left sports a tall top hat and the women on either side wear full-skirted dresses. Between the two couples, a home with smoke rising from the chimney appears in the background. The addition of the home may represent the importance of family and home, and it may also be seen as a representation of Black contributions to American architecture. To the far right, next to another dancing pair, two seated musicians are included, both with pork-pie hats atop their heads, a visual signifier often associated with jazz. The addition of the musicians provides another element in the story of Black contributions to American culture.

Balancing the scene on the far left, a group of figures kneel on the ground and stand with hands raised to the sky as if in prayer. This group, too, may be read as contributing multiple, interrelated meanings to the story Douglas tells. First, they represent the spirituality of African American communities. With their inclusion in the dance scene, Douglas seems to be suggesting the link between the spiritual nature of African Americans and the development of other cultural forms like dance and music. In addition, the figures can be read as participating in yet another original American musical form: the spirituals that developed through the work songs and religious ceremonies of Southern slaves. In this reading, Douglas recognizes the contributions of both jazz and spirituals in the formation of other African American cultural styles, including the dance he focuses upon in this painting, the architectural element included in the background, and the creation of the visual aesthetic that he

carries out as the painter of the image. Douglas frames the figures with leaves from above and a variety of plantings on the ground below that seem to set the scene in the agricultural South. The entire painting, however, was installed above the doorway of the YMCA, a decidedly urban building that served as a central landmark for the many citizens of Harlem who used it for lodging, for community programs, as a safe gathering spot, and as a recreation facility. For many African Americans migrating from the South to Harlem, it would serve as their first home in the North. Through this painting, Douglas was able to link the Black "homeland" of the South with what became a new urban home in the North for many.

Through this commission, Douglas reestablished himself as the leading visual chronicler of Black American life. His résumé of completed work now included public murals in New York, Chicago, Nashville, and North Carolina. His illustrations for publications like *Crisis* and *Opportunity* and his mounting number of book cover commissions further spread his images throughout the nation and beyond. One illustration, *Forge Foundry*, completed while Douglas trained in Paris, appeared in the French journal *La Revue du monde noir*. In addition, Douglas received some attention for his easel paintings, including a positive mention in the *New York Times* for his first solo exhibition held at the Caz Delbo Gallery in 1933, and the inclusion of one painting, *High Bridge*, in the annual national tour funded by the Harmon Foundation. It was not surprising, then, that Douglas was selected in 1934 by the

Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create murals for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL).

In producing his most famous mural series for the newly built auditorium of the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in 1934, Douglas not only established a historical record for African Americans, but he also established his own connection with larger American trends in public art. Douglas earned one of the first commissions distributed to visual artists under a new federal relief program implemented by Franklin D. Roosevelt soon after his ascension to the presidency in March 1933. His participation in the program opened another avenue for the assertion of Black Americans as an important part of the larger cultural fabric of America, at least symbolically, as Douglas worked within a prescribed theme of the "American scene."

On May 12, 1933, President Roosevelt signed the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) to begin to address the widespread economic depression on a national level. He appointed Harry Hopkins, a trusted aide from his New York gubernatorial offices, to head the administration of the new program. Later that year, in November 1933, Roosevelt ordered the Civil Works Administration (CWA) to begin a program of work-relief to provide employment opportunities for some of the millions without jobs across the nation. The act provided for both blue-collar labor and for a few professional, or white-collar, positions, including some money reserved for artists. The funds for artists were funneled through the Treasury Department because that

department already was responsible for art commissions related to federal building projects such as murals found in courthouses, post offices, and other national facilities. By December 1933, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was formally introduced to provide employment for professional artists. The PWAP found supportive leadership under the direction of Edward Bruce, a painter himself, who had previously served in the United States Treasury as a silver expert. Utilizing the CWA organization of sixteen regions dividing the nation to distribute funding, Bruce quickly appointed staffing for each of the regions, and artist commissions were well underway by the start of 1934.³⁸

According to a 1968 report commissioned by the National Endowment of the Arts and written by art historian Francis V. O'Connor, "The primary aim of the PWAP was to furnish work for unemployed artists in the decoration of non-Federal public buildings and parks."³⁹ The Roosevelt administration, however, expressed

³⁸ Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1969), 16-18. See also Mallory B. Randle, "Texas Muralists of the PWAP," *Southwestern Art* 1, no. 1 (1966): 51-69. In her essay, Randle noted "there was criticism of the Roosevelt administration's decision in 1933 to include the artists on relief rolls and to appropriate over a million dollars for this purpose" (53). Franklin Roosevelt was surrounded, however, by advisors who were sympathetic to the arts. Such advisors included Harry Hopkins, who had included artists in projects under his leadership as a New York administrator, and Edward Bruce, who was a painter as well as administrator. In addition, artist George Biddle, a classmate of Roosevelt's at Groton preparatory school in Massachusetts, wrote to the President encouraging "that the United States emulate Mexico in permitting native artists 'to express the ideals of their time and country' through the decoration of publicly owned buildings" (53).

³⁹ O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 19.

concerns about offering artists too much freedom in their choice of subject matter, given the contemporary controversy and subsequent destruction of the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's inclusion of a likeness of the Russian communist leader Vladimir Lenin in a mural he painted for the privately owned Rockefeller Center in New York City.⁴⁰ Bruce emphasized, moreover, that the program was intended to

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18. In the spring of 1933, Diego Rivera began a mural for the new Rockefeller Center building in New York City with the given theme of "Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future." On April 24, 1933, the *New York World-Telegram* broke a story that Rivera's mural included the likeness of Lenin under the headline "Rivera Paints Scenes of Communist Activity and John D. Jr. Foots Bill," setting off a flurry of controversy. After members of the Rockefeller family and other associates failed in their attempts to convince Rivera to change the image, removing the controversial likeness, on May 9, 1933, Rivera was called down from his work and asked to leave. The murals were then covered from public view while debate raged about what to do with the offensive image. Despite pledges from the Rockefellers to arrange for the mural to be saved, and perhaps moved to another location, overnight on February 9, 1934, workers at the building were instructed to pull down the fresco and resurface the wall. For a history and discussion of the lasting significance of this incident see Robert L. Scott, "Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center: Fresco Painting and Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 41 (Spring 1977): 70-82.

Roosevelt's worries eventually proved warranted when some of the murals commissioned under the aegis of the PWAP in the 15th region in San Francisco for the newly constructed Coit Tower were similarly accused of conveying leftist messages. In June 1934, PWAP concerns about some murals convinced them to close the tower, which was scheduled to open to the public the following month. With the knowledge of what had happened to Rivera's mural fresh in their minds, San Francisco artists and their supporters took to the streets to protest the government action throughout the summer months of 1934. Eventually, the building was opened, with most of the murals intact. Some, however, remained quarantined from public view. Government officials, moreover, undertook a publicity campaign regarding the offending murals, downplaying their political and social significance while criticizing their didacticism. For more on the Coit Tower project see Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 128-159.

offer work for *professional* artists. In a letter to Juliana Force, the director of the New York region, Bruce wrote, "I think that we ought all remember that we are putting artists to work and not trying to make artists out of bums." In initial instructions sent out to regional directors on December 10, 1933, according to O'Connor's report, "Bruce had suggested that artists be employed on a weekly basis, so their performance could be checked and the 'drones' eliminated."⁴¹

In addition, the PWAP decided to implement quality standards in two ways. First, employment through the program was limited, with an original tally of only 2,500 artists divided throughout the entire United States on the basis of population within the regions. In theory, with the limited number of artists in their employ, the regional directors would be able to oversee the work of each of their commissions. Second, on a national level, the decision was made to require that subject matter for PWAP commissions fit within the umbrella of the "American scene." A revealing letter dated May 24, 1934, from Edward B. Rowan, who served as Assistant Technical Director nationally, described the implementation of the guidelines:

...the artist was encouraged to work in that mode which was compatible to his own individual nature. The one restriction, which I think was absolutely justified in view of the fact that the artists were working for the American Government, was that they stress in as far as possible the American scene. This was very broadly interpreted and rightly so. . . . There were very few nude paintings and my personal reaction is that this was as it should be in view of the fact that all of the works were designed for public buildings. All in all I think that the artists showed a very intelligent approach and we noted that many of

⁴¹ Quoted in Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 19.

those who in the past had done extremely experimental things attempted to tone down their expression with the result that there was a decided note of sincerity in the majority of the work. I hope you know me well enough to know that I have never disparaged experimental work—I personally get much pleasure from experimentation and encourage it in the case of private painters. . . . I hope you do not regard my attitude as narrow in this case but I was happy to see that there were few vaudeville stunts pulled by the artists under the Project.⁴²

Rowan made it clear that the project directors were expected to choose artists carefully who would conform to project standards.

According to O'Connor's accounting, the New York regional council helped around 800 artists from December 1933 until June 1934, when the program was continued under other funding umbrellas.⁴³ The New York council, under the

⁴² Edward B. Rowan, Assistant Technical Director of the PWAP to Emmanuel M. Benson, May 24, 1934. Quoted in O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*. 20.

⁴³ The timeline and division of responsibilities for art relief programs is a bit confusing. Francis O'Connor explained, "When the PWAP came to an end at that time, its work was taken over by the Works Division of the Emrgency [*sic*] Relief Bureau (ERB) of the Federal TERA [Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (1934-35)] which had been organized in December 1933, under the Civil Works Administration. It continued under this agency until August 1, 1935. . . . On August 1, 1935, the ERB of the Federal TERA was succeeded by the WPA for the City of New York, which, in turn, was officially replaced later in the fall of 1935 by the WPA/FAP [Works Progress Administration (1935-39) or Works Projects Administration (1939-43)/Federal Art Project]" (31). The confusion is compounded because this timeline explains only part of the program for artists. In addition to these arts relief programs (which eventually, under the WPA/FAP offered more comprehensive relief efforts to artists more broadly defined, including musicians, writers, etc. [25]), funding specifically for professional artists to decorate government buildings continued under the aegis of the Treasury Department. Upon the end of the PWAP programs, the Treasury Department organized the Section of Painting and Sculpture (often referred to as the Section) on October 14, 1934, which continued under the leadership of Edward Bruce (21). Concurrent with the operations of the

leadership of Juliana Force, closely followed the guidelines established at the federal level. "Especially stringent," explained O'Connor, "was the requirement that the 'American Scene' and a representational style were the criteria of quality art." The strict guidelines for choosing participants imposed by the New York committee drew the ire of many rejected artists and triggered public protests from the local Artists' Union. In response, Juliana Force, who also served as director of the Whitney Museum of Art, issued the following press release on March 18, 1934:

Our instructions also state that having many times more applicants than can possibly be employed under the quota for this Region, we are empowered to select those artists who, in our judgment, are of sufficient merit to warrant their employment. Quality is of first importance and must be made a major consideration in selecting which unemployed artists shall be employed.⁴⁴

Section within the Treasury Department was a grant of \$530,784 bestowed from the WPA to the Treasury in July 1935 "to establish a relief-program connected with the decoration of public buildings. This program was called the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP)" (25). According to O'Connor, "In all, 89 murals and 43 sculpture projects were completed for federal buildings and housing projects. In addition, about 10,000 easel paintings were allocated to government institutions and embassies. These works were done by about 446 artists" (26). Douglas's commission for the Atlantic City Housing Project in New Jersey, a mural of Frederick Douglass, was completed with the funding of the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-34. In a 1970 memoir, artist Edward Laning offered a more anecdotal illustration of the pressures put upon Juliana Force:

Mrs. Force was tough as long as she could play the great lady, but this was no time for ladies. I visited her one day in her fabulous apartment above the Museum and she told me of the outrages she was experiencing. As I bade her goodbye in the entrance room of the apartment (a room with walls of purple metal foil and a floor of lacquered chintz), she told me of a delegation of destitute artists she had recently received. "They stood on this very spot," she said, "and

Out of the 4,000 artists who had registered for employment in Manhattan, Douglas was one of the lucky few to receive a commission through PWAP. Given the tight competition for only a few commissions, Douglas must have had that theme of the American scene in mind when creating his proposal for the visual history of African Americans. In turn, the selection committee must have agreed that the *Aspects of Negro Life* series reflected some portion of American life when it chose his work.⁴⁵

It helped, too, that the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, which served an almost exclusively Black neighborhood, was one of four branches

howled insults at me. And as they turned to go, one of them *spat* here, right at my feet!"

Edward Laning, "New Deal Mural Projects," in *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 89-90.

⁴⁵ Edward Alden Jewell, in the *New York Times* on July 15, 1934, provided an update of PWAP projects in the New York City area. As Jewell noted, the PWAP had already been eliminated by this point and the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) "appears to be going vigorously ahead." In this same article, Jewell laments that so much of the art already completed under the project was conservative and uninspiring. The problem, he argued, was that the public buildings themselves were so traditional that the installation of contemporary art would clash. "The primary premises on which these builders build is grievously at fault," he concluded, "and until that anachronistic precedent be abolished we shall continue to have mural art wholly unrelated to the mood and requirements of our own time and place—that or sheer chaos." Jewell offered no analysis of Douglas's work, which likely was still under way in July, which might have given him some material for considering more modernist elements within New York public mural projects. Edward Alden Jewell, "Acres of Wall Space," *New York Times*, 15 July 1934, X7.

chosen to have a "miniature" stage constructed within it as part of the New York Public Welfare program. On September 16, 1934, the *New York Times* reported that the 135th Street library was the first to have their stage ready, "to be used this Fall and Winter for adult and younger groups trained by professional actors and actresses."⁴⁶ The stage was constructed in the basement of the building and was "lighted and equipped with all the professional conveniences of a modern Broadway playhouse," noted the *Chicago Defender*.⁴⁷ On the evening of Thursday, November 15, 1934, Douglas joined the celebrations that marked the official opening of the new auditorium and included a dedication of his murals. The celebrations included the presentation of two plays organized by the Harlem Community Theatre and an exhibition of works produced by adult students of Harlem art classes, both programs sponsored by the federal government.⁴⁸ The newspaper optimistically proclaimed

⁴⁶ "Stage in Library Ready." *New York Times*, 16 September 1934, N2.

⁴⁷ "Harlem to Have a Group of Stages," *Chicago Defender*, 22 September 1934, 9. A notice in the *New York Times* a year later, provided more specific details of the project, which served as the model for stages at other library branches. The stage "is twenty-three feet wide by twelve feet deep, with an apron extending two feet beyond the curtain. It is equipped with a suitable lighting system and twenty-four pieces of interchangeable scenery, including two windows, two doors, an arch and a fireplace," the column explained. "The auditorium seats 200 persons and has been decorated with four murals by Aaron Douglas, a Negro artist. Depicting progressive epochs in Negro life, they are entitled 'Jungle Dancers,' 'Visions of Liberty,' 'Idyll of the Deep South,' and 'Songs of the Towers.'" "\$2,500,000 WPA Fund for Public Library," *New York Times*, 22 August 1935, 17.

⁴⁸ "New York Stage Folks Hail Dedication of New Library," *Chicago Defender*, 17 November 1934, 9. The paper attached the theatre group to "the Amateur drama division of the Department of Public Welfare." The Federal Emergency Relief Agency distributed funds for a variety of arts programs through New York City's

that Douglas "has caught the spirit and has put it into exciting and symbolic murals. The opening exercises are expected to attract many, and to show the community much of the growing artistic life becoming a reality here."⁴⁹ With the addition of the auditorium space, the library further solidified its position as a public gathering center for the Harlem community. Douglas's images of Black American history provided an important context for the many programs offered in the library.⁵⁰

Department of Public Welfare. It placed the art students under "the Art Workshop of the Harlem Adult Education committee, which is taught by Charles Alston." According to a study by Jeff Richardson Donaldson, at that time two programs were offered in Harlem at that time. The first was officially known as "the August[a] Savage Studio of the Harlem Branch of the Adult Education Project of the University of the State of New York," and was supported by the PWAP. Classes were held in a basement location at 239 West 135th Street, starting in early 1934, after moving from her cramped one-room studio apartment on West 143rd Street (105-106). Donaldson explained that a second workshop sponsored by the Harlem Adult Education Committee (HAEC) opened on July 10, 1933, at 270 West 136th Street. Under the name of The Art Workshop and Studio, "free instruction in graphics, ceramics and crafts design was offered by James L. Wells (director) and Palmer Hayden (assistant director)," according to Donaldson. After that first summer, Charles Alston took over the directorship when Wells returned to his teaching duties at Howard University. The Art Workshop and Studio first was sponsored by the College Art Association with funds provided by the Federal Relief Act, but, as more funds became available under the Civil Works Administration Act of November 1934, according to Donaldson, "the ever-aggressive and persuasive Alston wasted little time in convincing officials to rent space in a building at 306 West 141st Street for his living quarters and for an art workshop" (108-110). This marked the beginning of the Harlem Art Workshop, nicknamed simply "306," a studio workshop and gathering spot for intellectual discussion that nurtured artists like Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, and Norman Lewis. Jeff Richardson Donaldson, "Generation '306'—Harlem New York," PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1974.

⁴⁹ "New York Stage Folks Hail Dedication," 9.

⁵⁰ The murals were initially installed in the basement auditorium of the original library building, a 1905 Andrew Carnegie funded construction, in the fall of 1934. In

the spring of 1941, funds for an extension to the library were approved. The new structure was planned to face West 136th Street with corridors to the original construction. On October 28, 1941, New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia laid the cornerstone for the new construction in a ceremony attended by 5,000 in Harlem. The *Chicago Defender* noted that the new construction was being built on the site where Madame C. J. Walker's famous townhouse had once stood. Walker's only daughter, A'Lelia, upon her inheritance of the property in 1919, turned one floor of the townhouse into a popular salon dubbed The Dark Tower. The article also explained that the new construction would provide more room for the Schomburg Collection of African and African American literature and history, purchased from collector Arthur (or Arturo) A. Schomburg, a long-time Harlem resident who was born in Puerto Rico, by the New York Public Library in 1927. The *Defender* explained that the original structure--where Douglas's murals resided--was "being remodeled, and will contain the children's library, with room for circulation, story hours, and reference work. In the basement of the old building, the auditorium, with a stage, will continue to be used for amateur dramatics" ("Dedicate Library on Site of Mme. C. J. Walker Home"). The new annex opened its doors in June 1935. The opening included an exhibition of paintings by Charles Alston who, the *Chicago Defender* noted, "was director of the art workshop sponsored by the library in 1934 and 1935" ("1,500 See Harlem Library Dedicated").

In the summer of 1949, the art gallery of the Schomburg Collection sponsored an exhibition of paintings by Aaron Douglas who, the *New York Times* stated, "is regarded as a pioneer of the modern African style." Douglas attended the opening as its guest of honor ("Libraries Schedule Events for the Week," 5 June 1949). In early January 1950, the murals were re-installed in a room in the new annex. The *New York Times* reported, "The room is called the Aaron Douglas Mural Room in honor of Mr. Douglas, who, together with Walter Pach, will be the guest of honor at the ceremonies" ("Libraries Schedule Events for the Week," 1 January 1950). Pach (1881-1958) was a white artist, art historian, and critic who championed the cause of modernist art in America throughout his long life. Around 1951, the older building was renamed the Countee Cullen Regional Branch of the New York Public Library, in honor of the Harlem poet who died in 1946. The Countee Cullen library was designated as the circulating library for the community, and the new annex housed the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and History.

By 1970, efforts were underway to raise funds for a new building that would offer expanded facilities. After a decade of struggles to raise the funds and complete the project, the newly christened Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture was dedicated on September 28, 1980. The new building, triple the size of the old annex, was built on Lenox Avenue (now Malcolm X Boulevard) between 135th and 136th Streets. The Douglas murals were transferred into the rather cramped, dark

For this mural series, Douglas drew from his well developed artistic skills and aesthetic language. The amount of care and effort devoted to these canvases shows in the details that have become hallmarks of the artist's murals and some of his illustrative work. Included throughout the four-panel series are figures drawn in the distinctive hard-edged manner evocative of Egyptian motifs that Douglas used in

setting of the reading room at the Schomburg. The Countee Cullen branch of the New York Public Library (the old annex) sits just north and west of the new building, which now incorporates the original 1905 Carnegie structure. Spring of 2007 witnessed a facelift of the 1980 building—the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture--providing an expanded and brighter new entrance, new office spaces, and a remodeled reading room, "reconfigured to reveal a soaring ceiling topped with an acoustic wood panel" ("Harlem's Cultural Anchor in a Sea of Ideas"). Douglas's murals still reside in the redecorated reading room, though they remain on tour with the retrospective exhibition until they return for the final stop at the Schomburg on August 30, 2008. I pieced together this chronology from the following newspaper articles: "Books on Negro Acquired by Uptown Branch Library," *New York Times*, 27 February 1927, X17; "Extension to N. Y. Library Is Started," *Chicago Defender*, 8 March 1941, 7; "La Guardia Starts New Library Work," *New York Times*, 29 October 1941, 21; "Dedicate Library On Site of Mme. C. J. Walker Home," *Chicago Defender*, 1 November 1941, 8; "1,500 See Harlem Library Dedicated," *Chicago Defender*, 13 June 1942, 11; "Libraries Schedule Events for the Week," *New York Times*, 5 June 1949, 77; "Libraries Schedule Events for the Week," *New York Times*, 1 January 1950, 46; Richard F. Shepard, "Two Distinct Libraries Serve Readers in Harlem," *New York Times*, 18 October 1964, 120; "Schomburg Group Seeks \$8-Million," *New York Times*, 22 July 1970, 13; C. Gerald Fraser, "Expanded Center in Harlem Urged," *New York Times*, 22 February 1972, 75; "A Black Studies Center Is Dedicated in Harlem," *New York Times*, 29 September 1980, 23; Felicia R. Lee, "Harlem's Cultural Anchor in a Sea of Ideas," *New York Times*, 11 May 2007, E25. In addition, I consulted "Countee Cullen Branch Information" from the New York Public Library website, <http://www.nypl.org/branch/local/man/htrinfo.html> accessed 22 February 2008. Additional information on the Schomburg Center is available in Celeste Tibbets, "Ernestine Rose and the Origins of the Schomburg Center," *Schomburg Center Occasional Papers*, No. 2 (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, 1989).

order to signify people of African ancestry. Within each of the panels, concentric circles of light serve to focus and highlight key elements of the scene, and in all cases the highlighted elements are those that suggest optimism and hope. All the images, too, include architectural elements, which progressively read through the series, suggest the role of African Americans in building the great American urban centers; and they include signs of trees and other vegetation, which in each mural provide a visual link to the agricultural South from which so many Black Americans traced their roots.

The murals are rendered in the muted earth tones that typify Douglas's work at this time. Throughout his career, he referred to his background and strength in draftsmanship over the use of color in constructing his images. Although by 1934 he certainly had developed a capability in the use of color in his paintings, his preference for building these murals first through the careful delineation of the forms and then adding color in a supportive role comes through.

In a 1973 lecture, Douglas described the opening night and unveiling of his first mural commission at The Club Ebony in Harlem. According to Douglas on that night, the white patron Albert Barnes "made a statement about my mural which rudely deflated my ego, but, nevertheless served as a constant guide to my work from that time to the present." "The statement was this," continued Douglas, "'You have painted the mural, now do it in color.' I didn't at once understand what he meant by these simple words. As I recall now, he wished me to understand that my colors were

pleasing enough in a pastel-ish manner but lacked the depth, richness and plastic quality one finds in a Persian miniature, an oriental rug, a medieval stained glass window, a Byzantine mosaic or a Titian or Tintoretto painting. It has, of course, taken an even longer time and an enormous amount of sweat and labor to begin to approach what was required."⁵¹ Douglas's account suggests his ever-present modesty and the retrospection of the septuagenarian who, in 1973, had recently completed a restoration of the murals at Fisk University in which he updated the color palette, moving away from his original pastel tones and toward deeper, richer colors.⁵²

Following their meeting, Barnes offered Douglas a scholarship to study the collection of modern art he had amassed at his estate in Merion, Pennsylvania. From his 1973 lecture comments, it seems clear that Douglas continued to study and implement changes in his use of color, but in the 1934 library murals the artist drew from a palette of more muted tones. In his history of African American artists, the artist and critic Romare Bearden, who had interviewed Douglas for his entry in the book, perceptively spoke to this aspect of Douglas's mural creation process. "To compensate for the dynamic optical rhythms of the circles," wrote Bearden, "he painted the figures in flat silhouettes, avoiding the eye-troubling concatenation of form and color. Colors were poised in relationship to each other as well as to the

⁵¹ Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance," Reel 1, Box 3, File 2, typewritten lecture, dated March 18, 1973, 14, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

⁵² For more on the restoration project of the Fisk University murals see Kirschke, "The Fisk Murals Revealed," 115-135. Douglas's restoration efforts, undertaken from the summer of 1965 through 1970, are discussed on pages 123-133.

overall design While the forms and colors move toward one another in overlapping oppositions, the linear boundaries are carefully designed to organize and pacify the murals so that the eye moves easily across their surfaces."⁵³ Though Douglas continued to study color theory throughout his life, Bearden captured the essence of the relationship between form and color in all of Douglas's murals.

The library mural series represents more than the apogee of Douglas's public art achievement. It also showcased his deeply rooted commitment to the Black community, not just in Harlem, but across the nation. Douglas knew that the library, like the Harlem YMCA, served as an important, regular gathering spot for New York's Black citizens of all classes. With that in mind, he chose the ambitious project of visually presenting African American history, which he collectively titled *Aspects of Negro Life*. The opening mural, in Douglas's words, "reveals the Negro in an African setting and emphasizes the strongly rhythmic arts of music, dance, and sculpture, which have influenced the modern world possibly more profoundly than any other phase of African life."⁵⁴ Douglas's murals fulfilled the PWAP mandate to provide (non-federal) public buildings with suitably "American" decoration. Douglas

⁵³ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 130.

⁵⁴ Douglas's remarks on the murals were published by the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library from notes produced by Douglas dated October 27, 1949. These remarks are printed in full in Bearden and Henderson's *A History of African-American Artists*, 131-32. Douglas was recognized in 1949 with an exhibition of his paintings at the re-named Schomburg branch of the New York Public Library. In a *New York Times* notice of the event, Douglas is referred to as "a pioneer of the modern African style." "Libraries Schedule Events for the Week." *New York Times*, 5 June 1949, 77.

used it as an opportunity, too, to offer a broadened scope of America to the many patrons who came through the library doors.

The second panel, *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, provides a three-part story that, read from right to left, begins with the end of slavery as represented by the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation and the cheering of the newly freed people. In the middle section of this story-rich panel, "the figure standing on the box," according to Douglas, "symbolizes the careers of outstanding Negro leaders during this time."⁵⁵ In the third section, to the far left, Douglas depicted the departure of the Reconstruction troops following the disputed presidential election of 1876. With the departure of the federal troops, Douglas signifies the rise of violence against Black Americans through the inclusion of the hooded Ku Klux Klan figures, who ride into the scene.

In subject matter, the third panel parallels that of the first. Titled *An Idyll of the Deep South*, Douglas portrayed the significance of the South in the development of Black American culture. The singing and dancing figures in the center of the composition echo those portrayed in the first panel, *The Negro in an African Setting*. Even as Douglas highlighted the continuation of these important cultural forms, which he believed had so significantly influenced modern American culture overall, he also included the toil and sorrow that fed into the development of the American work songs and spirituals, dance forms, and other artistic elements. To the right are

⁵⁵ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 131-32.

the agriculture workers laboring in the cotton fields; to the left appears a lynching scene, with mourners gathered together under the victim, who is represented by a long, trailing rope and by the legs and feet limply hanging alongside the tree trunk.

According to NAACP records, approximately 62 lynchings occurred annually between 1910 and 1919, most of them the result of mob violence in the South. After that the numbers dropped, even as the violence wreaked by race riots grew. As Robert A. Gibson writes, "These race riots were the product of white society's desire to maintain its superiority over Blacks, vent its frustration in times of distress, and attack those least able to defend themselves."⁵⁶ Unlike the lynching violence, which tended to occur in the rural South, white-initiated race riots were urban phenomena that more often happened in the North. The summer of 1919, dubbed "The Red Summer" by James Weldon Johnson, witnessed 26 race riots in cities scattered across the United States, including one in Omaha, Nebraska, not far from Lincoln, the university town where Douglas had graduated just two years earlier.

Race riots occurred during and after the Great War as whites used violence to restrict Black jobs and housing, and Blacks fought back. In a study of the riot that rocked Chicago in the summer of 1919, William Tuttle has observed that the violent clashes began "in gut-level animosities between black and white people." "The truly

⁵⁶ Robert A. Gibson, "The Negro Holocaust: Lynching and Race Riots in the United States, 1880-1950," Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, *Themes in Twentieth Century American Culture 2* (1979), <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html> accessed 16 December 2007.

bitter and functional animosities were thus not at the top," explained Tuttle, "but at the bottom, at the common denominators at which races coexisted—at the shop level in industry, at the block level, at the neighborhood recreational level."⁵⁷ Race riots continued much later into the twentieth century as simmering racial tensions between Blacks and whites periodically erupted into violence. The 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma riot nearly obliterated a previously thriving Black community.⁵⁸ A similar incident occurred in the massacre of the Black citizens of Rosewood, Florida, in 1923. And, within months after Douglas painted the library murals, Harlem itself experienced the effects of violence when "ten thousand angry Harlemites" marched down Lenox

⁵⁷ William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (1970; reprint, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), viii.

⁵⁸ Journalist Tim Madigan has documented the destruction of the community of Greenwood, Oklahoma, in his book *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001). Particularly disturbing in this case was the attempt by Tulsa's white-dominated media and political leaders to downplay the event. The *Tulsa Tribune* seemed pleased with the mob efforts. Richard Lloyd Jones, whose inflammatory publications played a role in sparking the massacre, wrote in an editorial published just days later, "It was a cesspool of iniquity and corruption. . . . This old 'Niggertown' had a lot of bad niggers and a bad nigger is about the lowest thing that walks on two feet. . . . The *Tulsa Tribune* makes no apology to the police commissioner or the mayor of this city for having pled with them to clean up the cesspools" (215-16). Oklahoma Attorney General S. Prince Freeling, charged with investigating the burning, concluded to Tulsa business leaders that "'the cause of the riot was not Tulsa,'" but rather the Black citizens who, under the influence of "the continued tirades against the white race launched by Negro publications" had dared to organize (216-17). Finally, official tallies of the death toll for the incinerated community were placed at 185 by a Tulsa fire official on the scene. In subsequent reports "Tulsa's official estimate was quickly revised downward to seventy-seven dead—nine whites and sixty-eight Negroes, and reduced even further in coming days to ten whites and twenty-six Negroes" (222). Although no official count can ever be made, an investigation in the 1970s places the death toll at somewhere between 250-300 people.

Avenue on March 19, 1935, this time looting white-owned businesses and symbolically ending the optimistic era of the Harlem Renaissance.⁵⁹ Without doubt, Douglas shared the increasing impatience that many Black Americans felt with their second-class status as citizens.

The final panel of the series, too, suggests Douglas's awareness of the growing political and economic frustrations of working-class Blacks. A newspaper review noted that the series began in the jungles of Africa and ended in "the jungle of American industrialism, with the broken body of a Negro lying at the base of a giant cog-wheel."⁶⁰ As in all the mural panels, the composition centers upon an image that may be read as positive and optimistic. In *Song of the Towers*, a saxophone player, with instrument and arm raised triumphantly to the sky, rides the apex of a modern-day cog that rolls between a decidedly urban setting characterized by skyscrapers and smoke-chugging factory chimneys. Yet in Douglas's 1949 descriptions of the panel, he reveals the underlying tension and darkness of this scene:

In the fourth panel, *Song of the Towers*, the first section on the right, showing a figure fleeing from the clutching hand of serfdom, is

⁵⁹ According to historian David Levering Lewis, by the time Harlem residents took to the streets in 1935, "almost 50 percent of families were out of work, yet a mere 9 percent of them received government relief jobs. The community's single public medical facility, Harlem General Hospital, with 273 beds and 50 bassinets, served 200,000 Afro-Americans. The syphilis rate was nine times higher than white Manhattan's; the tuberculosis rate was five times higher; the pneumonia and typhoid rates were twice as high; two black mothers and two black babies died for every white mother and infant." Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 306-7.

⁶⁰ T. R. Poston, "Murals and Marx: Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left With PWA Decoration," *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 November 1934, 9.

symbolic of the migrations of Negroes from the south and the Caribbean into the urban and industrial life of America during and just after World War I; the second section represents the will to self-expression, the spontaneous creativeness of the late 1920s, which spread vigorously throughout all the arts in an expression of anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people; the last section of this panel attempts to recreate the confusion, the dejection and frustration resulting from the Depression of the 1930s.⁶¹

Even in the description of the musician, Douglas poetically represents him as "an expression of anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people." Yet, he worried at the time that the final panel reflected something of his own growing political discontent.⁶²

The murals received only passing notice at the time. *The Chicago Defender* reported on the official opening night ceremonies held on Thursday, November 15, 1934, which included an exhibition of student work from the workshop led by Charles Alston, the presentation of two plays from the Harlem Community theatre, and the unveiling of Douglas's murals. Referring to the artist, the newspaper noted, "Mr. Douglass [*sic*] too has caught the spirit and has put it into exciting and symbolic

⁶¹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 131-32. Scholar Cedric Dover reproduced the four mural panels on the endpapers of his 1960 study *American Negro Art* (London: Studio Books, 1960) and included a different set of brief notes describing each panel, which Dover also attributes to the artist. The descriptions close with the comment by Douglas, "Here the series ends, for it was painted in those days. The understanding that also came with hard times, the later struggles and successes, are reflected in the subsequent art of the American Negro people" (back endpaper).

⁶² Poston, "Murals and Marx," 9. Reporter T. R. Poston wrote, "Mr. Douglas is openly apologetic about the note of defeat upon which his mural ends."

murals."⁶³ Just a few days before, the same paper had featured a large photograph of the artist in his work coat with paints and brushes in hand under the headline "A Distinguished Painter." The caption beneath the smiling artist reads: "Outstanding among modern artists is Aaron Douglas of New York whose murals are found in public buildings in various parts of the country and whose illustrations are widely known. His work is notable, of course, aside from any consideration of race, but the fact that he so often chooses Race themes makes him interesting as an artist keenly aware of his racial background."⁶⁴ The commentary goes on to list some of Douglas's work, including the recently completed library murals. Readers of *The Chicago Defender* had already had their collective attention turned toward Douglas, and they would see even more regular notices of him throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

An article in *The New York Times* by Edward Alden Jewell published in July 1934 mentions the murals in passing as one of the projects of the PWAP, an agency that had already been eliminated by the time Jewell wrote his commentary. As he reported, projects already underway, including Douglas's, were to receive allocated funding through the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA).⁶⁵

⁶³ "New York Stage Folks Hail Dedication of New Library," *Chicago Defender*, 17 November 1934, 9.

⁶⁴ "A Distinguished Painter: Aaron Douglass," *Chicago Defender*, 10 November 1934, 10. Aaron Douglas's name was frequently misspelled this way in the newspapers and elsewhere. Within the Black community, especially, the name Frederick Douglass—properly spelled—was so prominent that it is likely that journalists and others assumed that the artist used the same spelling.

⁶⁵ Jewell, "Acres of Wall Space," X7.

Douglas had received more attention from *The Times* for the earlier Fisk murals. Perhaps the increasing tensions between Black and white Manhattan had already diminished the mainstream interest in Harlem cultural production.

By 1936, even Alain Locke seems to have lost some of his earlier enthusiasm for Douglas by the time the artist painted the library murals. In an essay printed in the *American Magazine of Art* in September 1931 (just as Douglas was preparing to leave for Paris), Locke wrote that Douglas "deserves to be called the pioneer of the African Style among the American Negro artists. His book illustrations have really set a vogue for this style, and his mural decorations for Club Ebony, New York, the Sherman Hotel, Chicago, and the symbolic murals of the Fisk University Library are things of fine originality."⁶⁶ In his 1936 publication, *Negro Art: Past and Present*, Locke backs away a bit, however. Although he characterized Douglas (whose names he misspelled as *Douglass*) as "one of the pioneer Africanists," Locke goes on to explain that "In turning successfully to a modernized version of African patterns, Mr. Douglass has taken his place beside [Miguel] Covarrubias⁶⁷ as an outstanding

⁶⁶ Alain Locke, "The American Negro as Artist," *American Magazine of Art*, 23, no. 3 (1931): 210-220. The reference to Douglas is found on page 218. In his conclusion Locke mentioned Douglas again as one of the new, younger artists capable of channeling "the constructive lessons of African art" in order to "offset with equal force the banalities of sterile, imitative classicism and the empty superficialities of literal realism" (220).

⁶⁷ Born in 1904 in Mexico City, Miguel Covarrubias established a reputation as a caricaturist and illustrator for a number of Mexican publications before migrating to New York City in 1923. His caricatures appeared regularly in *Vanity Fair*, from 1924-1936, and in the *New Yorker*, from 1925-1950. One of his first commissions for

exponent of Negro types and design motives. . . . A very versatile talent, Douglass [sic] has done extensive large scale decoration in murals, usually on the Negro of African subject." Included in Locke's listing of mural projects is "a later panel series for the auditorium of the *135th St. Harlem Branch Library*, illustrating Negro life in *Africa* (a festival dance), *Slavery*, *Reconstruction* and *Metropolis*, the background of Harlem."⁶⁸

Vanity Fair was illustrating a two-page collaboration with the West Indian writer Eric Walrond titled "Enter the New Negro, a Distinctive Type Recently Created by the Coloured Cabaret Belt in New York," for the December 1924 issue. In his 1925 letters from Harlem to Alta Sawyer, Douglas named Walrond as one of his earliest friends in the city. Covarrubias also illustrated *The Weary Blues* for Langston Hughes in 1926, and, following a tour of the South in 1927 Covarrubias published *Negro Drawings*, which received positive attention from both white and Black critics. Covarrubias continued to gain illustration commissions for Harlem projects, and Douglas mentioned his work approvingly in later interviews. For more on Covarrubias see Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, especially 101-112. Like Douglas, Covarrubias's interests went beyond his art. In a tribute written in 1957 following his death in February that year, Daniel F. Rubin de la Borbolla wrote, "He had an amazing store of information on the life, culture, and arts of many peoples of Asia, Africa, America, and many other parts of the world, and an insatiable desire to know the cultures and arts of ancient Mexico." Daniel F. Rubin de la Borbolla, "Miguel Covarrubias, 1905-1957," *American Antiquity* 23, no. 1 (1957): 63-65.

⁶⁸ Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Albany, N.Y.: The J. B. Lyon Press for The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 67-68. In this publication, Locke seems more interested in bringing African American artists into the broader fold of American art, especially one devoted to social themes, than in the explicit development of the Black aesthetic that he had espoused in such essays as "The New Negro" for *Survey Graphic* in March 1925. Moreover, Locke had a pattern of turning his interest from one artist, to another, usually younger, one. For instance, while Locke initially championed the writing of Langston Hughes, by 1937 he had accused Hughes of "failing to build on his 'revelation of the emotional color of Negro life and his brilliant discovery of the flow and rhythm of the modern and especially the city Negro.' This failure, Locke said, resulted in 'essentially a jazz version of Negro life . . . and though fascinating and true to an epoch this version was *surface quality after*

While today *Aspects of Negro Life* is widely regarded as Douglas's most monumental and enduring artistic achievement, the shifting social and economic climate of the mid-1930s may have diminished the earlier acclaim that greeted his work. Especially in the Black urban communities, concerns about employment, housing, and other matters of survival superseded those of cultural development. This new attitude affected Aaron Douglas as well, and in the coming years, he would work toward new ways of helping his community that went beyond providing an artistic voice to champion the equality of Blacks in American life. Like his friend Langston Hughes, Douglas explored new avenues that elevated him into even larger spheres of leadership.

all." Locke turned his attentions toward the up-and-coming poet Sterling Brown. For more, see the introduction to *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 4. Here, Locke seems to make a similar move, referring a couple of times to Douglas's "decorative" skills.



Figure 3.1: P. H. Polk, *Aaron Douglas*, ca. 1932.

Chapter Three **From Self-Reliance to Racial Uplift**

During his early adulthood, letters between Aaron Douglas and his future wife Alta Sawyer revealed common American aspirations for success. In Douglas's position as an art teacher at the all-Black Lincoln High School in Kansas City, he participated in the middle-class activities that gained notice in the pages of the community newspaper. He wrote, for instance, of regular appearances at dances and social gatherings, and, he was mentioned as an invited guest at meetings of local arts

groups. As a well-educated young Black man with steady employment in a professional career, Douglas was on his way to firmly establishing his position among the Negro bourgeoisie. His decision, in the summer of 1925, to resign his position at Lincoln High School to pursue a full-time career in art in New York City was an act of faith.

He had already survived one year, immediately following his graduation from the University of Nebraska, which he later remarked taught him "that the joy of sitting around with an empty stomach in a studio filled with unpurchased pictures held little glamour and no satisfaction."¹ The job offer from Kansas City, Missouri, rescued him from the discomforts experienced that year. Yet, he decided after two years in his comfortable position at Lincoln High School to take another chance on a career in art. In his unpublished autobiography notes he described that decision:

. . . I realized that I had again reached a dead end, or rather a fork in the road. One way led to an uneventful, pleasant old age, the other appeared to lead over high mountains, through deep valleys and into dark pathless woods. At this point it seemed to me that a really meaningful life must be one given to struggle against hunger and poverty of the spirit rather than one given simply to the pursuit of security and freedom from bodily pain. I resigned my high school job in June, 1925 and prepared to join the growing band of immigrants seeking a cultural home in Harlem.²

¹ "An Autobiography," Reel 1, Box 1, File 1, 10, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tenn. (microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

² *Ibid.*

Using poetic language with traditional Black religious overtones, Douglas expressed the ultimate value of individual sacrifice in the service to the greater good. He gave up the path to "an uneventful, pleasant old age" in pursuit of an unknown future that offered the possibility of "a really meaningful life."

His decision to take his chances in Harlem proved to be a crucial turning point, not only in the development of his artistic career, but also—perhaps even more significantly—in the evolution of his leadership role in African American society. Throughout his life, Douglas made decisions based upon core values developed early in his life: the importance of hard work and struggle in the formation of character; the role of education in forming a foundation upon which to build; success in life based upon staying true to self rather than upon outside economic or social factors; and commitment to one's community, however broadly defined. Such beliefs increasingly steered Douglas's life toward one of service to others. To understand Douglas in such a role re-situates his life and work—as an artist, a writer, and a teacher—in a way that fruitfully shapes understanding of him. In this chapter I argue that recognizing Aaron Douglas as an engaged public intellectual provides a perspective for understanding his life's work--which includes not only the artistic products of his labor, but also the ramifications of his oral and written work delivered through various venues. Taken together, they reveal a body of work whose intent was to offer a context for understanding the development of American life, reveal the pathos of a culture on the

journey through American life, and suggest a path to a better future. In short, Douglas sought to serve as public voice for his people.

If Douglas's decision to move to Harlem marked one turning point in his life, his work on the murals for the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library in 1934 marked another one. Soon after the installation of the murals in the newly constructed theater auditorium, Douglas was interviewed by Ted Poston for the *New York Amsterdam News* about the murals.³ Under a headline that declared, "Murals and Marx: Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left With PWA Decoration," Poston offered an incisive review of the work and an interview with the artist. "Those who view Aaron Douglas' new mural at the 135th street branch library will hardly suspect the influence of Karl Marx on the delicately-beautiful decoration," wrote Poston. "But the patron saint of the Revolution has left his mark there just the same."⁴ Although,

³ Ted R. Poston (1906-1974) reported for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Amsterdam News*, and he held a position as the first African American reporter for a mainstream New York City newspaper, *The New York Post* from the 1930s through 1972. He interrupted his *Post* career by serving as head of the Negro News Desk with the Roosevelt administration's Office of War Information during World War II. He covered many key stories of Black civil rights throughout his career, including the trip taken in 1932 by Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, and other Harlem residents to the Soviet Union; the Scottsboro trial of 1933; and the historic 1954 U. S. Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. In 1949 he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his investigative work on the story of four young Black men accused and convicted of raping a white woman in Groveland, Florida. See Kathleen A. Hauke, *Ted Poston: Pioneer American Journalist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

⁴ T. R. Poston, "Murals and Marx: Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left With PWA Decoration," *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 November 1934, 9.

as Poston commented, stylistically the new murals seemed "little different from previous murals," they represented a philosophical turning point in Douglas's life.

In the interview, Douglas shared that previous murals, including those completed for Club Ebony in Harlem in 1927, for the Sherman Hotel in Chicago in 1930, and for Fisk University also in 1930, were part of what he called his "Hallelujah" period. Reflecting the kind of popular sentiment about the curative elements of unspoiled Black culture current in the 1920s, Poston reported, "At that time . . . the artist believed that the Negro was destined to save the 'soul' of America."⁵ Although the library murals, *Aspects of Negro Life*, might not appear greatly different than the earlier pieces, Douglas asserted that they were drawn from a more radicalized leftist impulse, though he declined to position himself as a proletarian painter. His path to a Marxist philosophy followed his early embrace of "Negro Destiny theory" and a flirtation with Gurdjieffian teachings (described by Poston as "the know-thyself cult in which Jean Toomer and other Negro intellectuals were interested").⁶ "I had sought escape through so many of these theories," Douglas told Poston, "that when I finally encountered the truth through the

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* For an analysis of the influence of Gurdjieff on the development of Douglas's visual aesthetic, see Marissa Vincenti, "A Matter of Spirit: Aaron Douglas, Gurdjieffian Thought, and the Expression of 'Conscious Art'," *The International Review of African American Art* 21, no. 3 (2007): 11-15.

revolutionary movement, I was absolutely unable to face reality. I had to cast aside everything that I had once believed and begin anew."⁷

As Poston observed, Douglas included few obvious markers of his Marxist leanings in the murals created under the aegis of the federal government. Douglas suggested that he considered a fifth panel to the series that would have shown "the way out for the Negro . . . the unity of black and white workers in the class struggle."⁸ Without this panel, he considered the series incomplete, yet Douglas understood that if he had included such a statement, the entire series would have been rejected by federal administrators. As they were, Douglas believed that his murals depicted a rather conservative and objective view of Black history. In the process of their creation, however, Douglas self-consciously turned the corner into a new more radical and leftist phase in his life. This turn was reflected in his increasingly political profile and supported his rise as a Black public intellectual.

Throughout the 1930s Douglas joined in a number of social and political campaigns, especially those focused on the improvement of Black life, and he regularly took a leadership role. *The Chicago Defender*, "the nation's most influential black weekly newspaper," often published news of Douglas in its pages.⁹ As early as September 1928 the paper had reprinted a column on "New Negro Leadership" from

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "The Chicago Defender," http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/defender.html, accessed 28 December 2007.

the *New York Times* that pegged Aaron Douglas as an up-and-coming leader. The article named Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Aaron Douglas as examples of artists who provided "leadership [that] plays as large a part as more conscious direction in the social transformation of the Negro."¹⁰ New York papers like *The New York Amsterdam News* listed Douglas somewhere in nearly every edition, reporting on his fulfillment of the social duties that marked him as a recognized community leader.

In a 1931 column published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, writer Eugene Gordon ranked Aaron Douglas fourth on his list of "most gifted negroes in the United States."¹¹ In making his selection, Gordon first created broad categories for

¹⁰ "Other Papers Say; New Negro Leadership," *Chicago Defender*, 1 September 1928, A2; reprint from the *New York Times*, 15 April 1928, 54. Although no author appears on the column, the introduction cites an article that appeared in the April issue of *Current History*, a publication of the *New York Times*, by Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier.

¹¹ Eugene Gordon was a feature writer for *The Boston Globe*, a mainstream paper, and he regularly wrote columns for Black newspapers and magazines such as *Opportunity*, *The Messenger*, and *The Pittsburgh Courier* throughout the 1920s and 1930s. A note at the beginning of a 1928 column from *The Pittsburgh Courier* provides a little information on Gordon, who was born in Oviedo, Florida. The note says that he is a young man and provides a birth year, but the smallness of the type makes that date illegible. "Gordon Surveys Editorials In Race Press," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 February 1928, 8. Another new brief in 1934, mentions that Gordon, along with Langston Hughes, has been named to the editorial board of *The New Masses*. "Hughes and Gordon on New Masses," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 January 1934, 2. Finally, a 1954 column by George Schuyler, commented on "Eugene Gordon, now a Communist hack, but then a feature editor of the Boston Post, wrote a scathing letter terminating our association as 'an enemy so unscrupulous that he must be given no quarter.'" Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 May 1954, 23. Schuyler refers to an incident from 1934 when a number of Black activists

consideration that included "Business," "Professions," "Art," "Science," "Education," "Politics," and "Miscellaneous," through which, he concluded, "we shall take in everybody."¹² Justifying his choices through stated criteria that included ideas like originality, social value, initiative, and success, Gordon rated Douglas just below Albon L. Holsey, a businessman and board member of the National Negro Business League; Louis T. Wright, the first African American on the surgical staff of Harlem Hospital and a NAACP board member; and Langston Hughes, whom he listed as a novelist and poet.¹³ Although an argument may be made about the decision to place Douglas ahead of great Black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois, George Washington Carver, and Carter G. Woodson—as well as others not named—that Douglas made it to such an esteemed list speaks to his standing in the Black world at that moment.

As if to punctuate Douglas's increasing stature in the community, in November the same newspaper printed a large photo of the smiling artist with brush

censured him for his criticism of Black Communist involvement and of Angelo Herndon, then a young man, arrested for his part in organizing a demonstration in Atlanta, Georgia. Aaron Douglas was among those who publicly expressed outrage at Schuyler's comments at that time. For more on Angelo Herndon, see Mark D. Naison, "Herndon Case," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 307.

¹² Eugene Gordon, "Gordon Names the Thirteen Most Gifted Negroes in United States," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 March 1931, 16.

¹³ *Ibid.* Douglas is listed as a painter and illustrator. The rest of the list included: "5. Roland Hayes, singer; 6. Paul Robeson, singer and actor; 7. George Schuyler, novelist; 8. George W. Carver, scientist; 9. Ernest E. Just, bio-chemist; 11. Henry A. Hunt, educator; 12. W. E. B. DuBois, editor and sociologist; 13. Carter G. Woodson, historian."

and palette in hand under the heading "A Distinguished Painter." A paragraph-long description underscored the photograph's message. The description began:

"Outstanding among modern artists is Aaron Douglas of New York whose murals are found in public buildings in various parts of the country and whose illustrations are widely known. His work is notable, of course, aside from any consideration of race, but the fact that he so often chooses Race themes makes him interesting as an artist keenly aware of his racial background."¹⁴ The caption continued with descriptions of several of his key projects including the recently completed murals for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library.

A week later notice of the new library auditorium dedication appeared. Douglas's mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life*, was first hung in the auditorium, which was meant to serve as a center of artistic life for the Harlem community. The newspaper reported the dedication events, which included an exhibition of student work from the Harlem Adult Education committee headed by Charles Alston and two plays to be presented by the Harlem Community theater group. "Mr. Douglass [*sic*] too has caught the spirit" the article noted, "and has put it into exciting and symbolic murals."¹⁵ The *Defender's* estimated half-million readers regularly learned of the accomplishments of the "distinguished" artist from New York. Through regular

¹⁴ "A Distinguished Painter: Aaron Douglass," *Chicago Defender*, 10 November 1934, 10. Douglas's name was regularly misspelled in the pages of the *Defender*.

¹⁵ "New York Stage Folks Hail Dedication of New Library," *Chicago Defender*, 17 November 1934, 9.

notice in newspaper columns that circulated throughout Black urban centers, Douglas increasingly was seen as a key leader, and as a public intellectual.

Not only racial consciousness but also economic and political concerns led Douglas to more direct engagement. In late July 1934, Douglas participated in a two-day symposium on the issue of race and labor held at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library. The symposium was organized by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Workers' Bureau of America to discuss the impact of federal National Recovery Administration (NRA) programs on Black workers.¹⁶ Black politicians and leaders feared either Blacks would be excluded from NRA jobs or that individuals would be relegated only to menial positions. Clark Foreman, a white administrator in the Department of the Interior, stirred some debate at the meeting by citing a recent report of the Interracial Commission of the South that "discovered that the NRA had proven advantageous to the Race." A *Chicago Defender* account of the meetings described how one speaker after another challenged Foreman on his findings and concluded that "the report of the interracial committee was discredited as being false." In the general discussion held on the first evening of the meeting, reporter Cleveland Allen noted that "Aaron Douglass [*sic*] . . . took issue with Dr. Foreman, saying that the NRA had not proven to be a success. He cited the unrest

¹⁶ See Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-36* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 233-238. Solomon illustrated the disdain Blacks had through their renaming of the program: "For blacks, the acronym *NRA* became 'Negroes Roasted Alive,' 'Negroes Ruined Again,' 'Negroes Robbed Again,' 'Negro Repressive Act,' 'Negro Run Around'" (234).

which is sweeping over the country. Mr. Douglass said that the NRA had done nothing for the great masses of Race members who reside in the south."¹⁷

Later that year, Douglas was linked to another labor campaign. He was listed as one of four members of the New York committee of the National Congress for Unemployment and Social Insurance that planned to meet in Washington, D.C. in early January 1935 for the purpose of preparing a proposal for "unemployment and social legislation which will embody a demand for federal compensation for all time lost for those now unemployed financed by higher taxes upon higher incomes and inheritances."¹⁸ For Douglas such commitments of time and energy were consistent with his working-class background, his growing race and political consciousness, and his art, which combined historical narratives and race themes and was aimed at, in part, working-class, Black audiences. His participation and leadership in these movements in the 1930s demonstrates his race and political commitments.

¹⁷ Cleveland G. Allen, "Race Labor and NRA Discussed at Institute: Clark Foreman and Others on New York Program," *Chicago Defender*, 4 August 1934, 24.

¹⁸ "Seeks Support for Job Insurance Bill," *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 December 1934, 4. Underlining his continued devotion to his art—even as he participated in political activities—in the same edition of the paper, Douglas was listed as a contributor to a new magazine, *The Metropolitan*, published by Meeks Publishing Company under the editorship of Beatrice Meeks-Riley and her sister, Marian Meeks. The magazine was "devoted chiefly to fiction, essays, feature articles and poetry," according to the newspaper. Other named visual artists involved with the publication included E. Simms Campbell, John Atkinson, Ernest Crichlow "and other prominent artists." "New Magazine to Appear on Newsstands Here Tomorrow," *New York Amsterdam News* 22 December 1934, 1.

Douglas demonstrated his willingness, moreover, to take on leadership roles through his participation in the formation of the American Artists' Congress in 1935 and his presidency of the newly established Harlem Artists' Guild. With the spread of economic distress and the rise of Nazism and fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, artists in the United States used their art to give voice to protest and express their concerns for humanity. With despair of existing economic and political systems widespread, and with neo-Marxists offering an analysis that seemed to explain the economic crisis in the West, many intellectuals found that the Communist Party (CPUSA) offered an alternative to the collapsed market system. The left also led in opposition to the rising fascism in Europe, much of it focused on the Spanish Civil War in the mid-1930s. But toward the end of the decade, as the United States geared up for entry into World War II, economic expansion alleviated some of the economic distress, and events in both Europe and Asia increasingly turned American attention to security concerns.

By 1935, the Communist Party decided to implement a new strategy of cooperation among other groups attempting to halt the spread of fascism and end the threat of a new world war. Known as the Popular Front, the strategy appealed especially to African Americans who already tended to work collectively in their communities for racial improvement. The broadened scope of Popular Front policies opened up new possibilities for artists in the party, who had previously been under

some pressure to present a more narrowly defined party message.¹⁹ Under the new Popular Front policies the John Reed Clubs, which had been established in 1929, were shut down and new, more politically encompassing, organizations took hold in the form of the American Artists' Congress, the Artists' Union, and the Artists' Committee of Action.²⁰

Blacks, however, had already integrated Communist-organizing influences with more inclusive attitudes for community participation. Educator and activist Louise Thompson arrived in Harlem in 1928 and soon began work as an organizer in a number of political organizations, including those with close Communist ties. One such group, co-founded with the sculptor Augusta Savage, was Vanguard, "the most

¹⁹ See Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1984), especially 169-177. See also, Patricia Hills, "Art Movements," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 64-68. The implementation of Popular Front strategies made Communism more appealing as leaders formed coalitions with New Deal supporters, socialists, religious and ethnic organizations, and more with the shared goal of stimulating the masses to fight the outside sources of fascism. As a result of the new policies party membership rose from 10,000 at the start of the 1930s to 65,000 by the end of the decade, though turnover rates remained high among Blacks, who tended to feel less loyalty to any single group in their fight against oppression. See Malcolm Sylvers, "Popular Front," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 591-595.

²⁰ See Hills, "Art Movements," 66-67. The magazine *Art Front*, an organ of the Artists' Union and the Artists' Committee of Action also found its genesis in these new directions. The first issue of *Art Front* appeared in November 1934 and continued until December 1937. Although the magazine was intended as a monthly publication, editors did not succeed in producing a magazine every month. As Gerald M. Monroe outlines in his essay on the publication, for instance, "the first volume of seven issues appeared intermittently over a period of thirteen months (November 1934, and January, February, April, May, July, and November 1935)." Gerald M. Monroe, "Art Front," *Archives of American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (1973): 13.

successful left-wing salon in 1930s Harlem, which sponsored dance, music, theater, and discussions of Marxist theory."²¹ Aaron Douglas, a regular participant in the group, contributed the cover illustration for an organization magazine published in spring 1935.²² While the group may not have fallen completely under Communist dictates, the atmosphere was ripe for artists like Douglas to move toward collective action.

Fueled by the same organizing spirit, artists unions arose across the nation.

There were a variety of motives for artists unions and organizations. The brief period of the National Recovery Administration and the Blue Eagle as well as hiring of

²¹ William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 143. Maxwell credits Thompson and Savage with influencing Aaron Douglas and Romare Bearden in a leftward direction from parties held in Thompson's Convent Avenue apartment. T. R. Poston, in a 1934 newspaper article, noted, "The artist and his wife, Mrs. Alta Douglas, have joined a group of young intellectuals who are making a serious study of Marx and his theories." Poston, "Murals and Marx," 9. See also Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 100. Naison described Vanguard as "[l]eft-wing in tone, but not openly Communist. . . . Among its participants were Aaron Douglass [*sic*], an artist whose home served as a meeting place for Harlem intellectuals, Romeo [*sic*] Bearden, a popular theatre critic, and Langston Hughes."

²² Roi Ottley, a regular columnist for *The New York Amsterdam News*, reported in April 1935, "'Struggle', the organ of the Vanguard, has finally come to hand. . . . its initial issue is worth your time." Roi Ottley, "Hectic Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 April 1935, 9. This notice helps identify the "mystery" illustration now in the Schomburg Center collection, that features the title "Spark: Organ of the Vanguard," executed by Douglas in 1934. It seems likely that the Schomburg piece is a preliminary sketch for the final magazine cover. I have not yet found a copy of the 1935 publication to make useful comparisons but doing so should provide more information in this puzzle. See Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 90-91. The cover illustration "Spark" is reproduced in Susan Earle, ed. *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 171.

artists under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) all encouraged workers' labor organizations; for the first time artist employment required, for many of them, collective representation. Rising political consciousness from both domestic and international events stimulated organization as well. Similarly, the emergence and activism of industrial unionism also served as a model for artists. Among the organized responses was the National Writers' Congress, which convened in April 1935. Within a couple of weeks labor organizer Alexander Trachtenberg and Stuart Davis, a white painter, began discussing the organization of a political group for visual artists. By August of 1935, Aaron Douglas had joined five other artists in drafting a manifesto for the American Artists' Congress.²³ Douglas's increasing leadership within the nascent Negro art world was underscored by his position as the sole African American voice on the committee.

At about the same time, Douglas became closely involved in the organization of the Harlem Artists' Guild. At their first meeting, an initial group of about fifty artists chose Douglas as their leader. Douglas's election as president of the Guild probably represented a combination of the CPUSA's support for recognition of Blacks in their strong opposition to Jim Crow and Douglas's leadership abilities and his articulation of concerns, both racial and political, of activist artists.

²³ The history of the American Artists' Congress and the American Writers' Congress is briefly outlined by Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams in their introduction to *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (1936; reprint, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 6-11.

While president, Douglas oversaw regular activities of the group and nurtured its growth. Romare Bearden, in 1971, recalled the formative meeting of the group:

Never before, and never since, has there been such a large representative organization of Black artists. The first meeting of the Guild was held during the mid-1930s. Aaron Douglas, whom we younger artists looked up to as the Dean of Afro-American painters, was elected Chairman. I was astonished to find nearly fifty artists present, since I had no idea there were that many Black artists in the entire country. My surprise was shared by most of the other artists, because until then we had been isolated.²⁴

In the summer of 1937 the group first exhibited works by its members at the American Artists' School Gallery. *Art Front*, the organ for the affiliated Artists' Union, of which the Harlem Artists' Guild was one member, provided a little background on the Harlem organization: "This vigorous organization, whose program originally concerned itself with the fostering of Negro rights in the field of culture, has broadened out to defend the interests of all artists regardless of color. Building up from less than a dozen members in March 1935, the Guild membership at

²⁴ Romare Bearden, "The 1930's—an art reminiscence," *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 September 1971, D24. In the 1960s, Bearden missed the community of Black artists in New York City, and in July 1963 gathered Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and Merton Simpson—"all of whom had shared in the psychic support generated by the Harlem Artists Guild and the 306 community during the 1930s,"--into his Canal Street studio for the formation of a new group: Spiral. Later, younger artists Emma Amos, Reginald Gammon, and Richard Mayhew would be associated with this organization that, like the Harlem Artists Guild, was interested in using art for the improvement of Black life. See Ruth Fine, "Romare Bearden: The Spaces Between," *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery of Art, 2003), 26-29.

present numbers about ninety artists."²⁵ In his role as Guild president, Douglas successfully lobbied the WPA to obtain commissions for other artists in Harlem, including Ernest Crichlow, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Alston, and Henry Bannarn. Douglas's pivotal role in securing these commissions earned him the moniker of "the Dean" although he was only a few years older than many of the grateful beneficiaries.²⁶

Early in 1936, he delivered his speech, "The Negro in American Culture," to delegates from across the Americas gathered at the first American Artists' Congress in New York City. Douglas offered his audience a brief history of African American art, achieved despite the obstacles of slavery, segregation, and racism. "[I]n spite of the critics, interpreters, and so-called friends of Negro art," asserted Douglas, "the Negro artists have emerged. Without support, without well-defined objectives, they have been suspended in mid-air between the hostility of most whites and the almost

²⁵ "Harlem Artist Guild Exhibits," *Art Front* 3, nos. 5-6 (1937): 16.

²⁶ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, "Aaron Douglas," *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 131. See also, Jeff Richardson Donaldson, "Generation '306'—Harlem New York," PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1974, especially 37-38. Donaldson (1932-2004) was a founding member (1969) of the Chicago-based African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AFRI-COBRA) and a part of the generation who largely rejected Douglas's art as irrelevant. In his dissertation Donaldson described Douglas's portraits (for which Donaldson claims Douglas gained prominence) as "competent but vapidly academic likenesses." He did credit Douglas for infusing "his Reiss-style murals and illustrations with a rhythm and a compelling sense of design which surpassed that of his mentor. These qualities plus Douglas' material success impressed younger artists and he enjoyed considerable prestige in the next decade" (37). Like many critics and admirers, Donaldson seemed unaware of all the political and social activity in which Douglas involved himself, in many cases as a leader.

total ignorance of their own people." Speaking in the increasingly popular language of the left, Douglas maintained that because American Negroes were "the proletarians of the proletariat, our chief concern as a group has been with segregation and discrimination (manifestations of economic exploitation) rather than with exploitation as such." He went on to explain how Black artists have always held a different position, even from other exploited workers as the targets of "all manner of propaganda from nursery rhymes to false scientific racial theories. In this struggle the rest of the proletariat almost invariably has been arrayed against us."²⁷ Douglas chose to break from the general theme of working-class unity in order to stress to his largely white audience the related, but different, challenges faced by Blacks.

Douglas closed his comments with an indictment of the system that continued to confine not only Black artists, but also the representation of Black Americans. In a more conciliatory closing he appealed

to every artist of this congress and to every lover of liberty and justice, everywhere, to fight against the rising tide of Fascism. If there is anyone here who does not understand Fascism let him ask the first Negro he sees in the street. The lash and iron hoof of Fascism have been a constant menace and threat to the Negro ever since his so-called emancipation. In America, race discrimination is one of the chief props on which Fascism can be built. One of the most vital blows the

²⁷ Aaron Douglas, "The Negro in American Culture," presented in a public session of the first American Artists' Congress against War and Fascism in New York City on February 14, 1936 and published in *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, edited by Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 82-84.

artist of this congress can deliver to the threat of Fascism is to refuse to discriminate against any man because of nationality, race, or creed.²⁸

In this passionate speech, Douglas clearly established his position as a Black public intellectual, situating the unique struggles of Black Americans within the larger national scene.

The March 1936 issue of the art journal *Parnassus* reported that Douglas's speech "met with an enthusiastic response." It further noted, "Subsequently a resolution was passed hailing the first Negro Congress in Chicago."²⁹ That Douglas's rousing speech met with positive response from his audience is not surprising. The concerns of the organizers of the National Negro Congress in Chicago, however, stood in some contrast to those artists assembled in New York City that same February weekend. While the organizers of the Artists' Congress called for artists to "realize that the cultural crisis" that they saw in dwindling support of the arts worldwide "is but a reflection of a world economic crisis and not an isolated phenomenon," they were concerned that an artist faced not only economic hurdles but also "a constant attack against his freedom of expression."³⁰ As witnessed at their first Congress and in the pages of *Art Front*, for most of the participating artists a

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Artists' Congress," *Parnassus* 8, no. 3 (1936): 31.

³⁰ "Call for the American Artists' Congress," published in *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 47-48.

principle concern was having a free voice in the midst of an economic crisis and growing international unrest.

In contrast, the National Negro Congress grew from a growing discontent among Black leaders that New Deal programs had done little for Blacks, who were the hardest hit by the devastating Great Depression. In fact, a conference "on the economic status of the Negro" held at Howard University in spring of 1935 publicized that such programs furthered dominant discriminatory and segregationist practices in the United States. In a pamphlet written to promote the organization, A. Philip Randolph asserted, "The magnitude, complexity and danger of the Negro's present condition demands the mobilization of overwhelming mass pressure and force, which can only be achieved through the agency of a National Negro Congress."³¹ The depression had burst the optimism of the New Negro Renaissance, which emphasized cultural achievement as a path to racial equality.

When the National Negro Congress convened on February 14, 1936, in Chicago, more than 5,000 people crowded into the Eighth Regiment Armory for three days of speeches and meetings. They elected A. Philip Randolph president and John P. Davis executive secretary; both men advocated a new direction in the fight against the continued relegation of Black Americans as the "submerged tenth."³² Delegates

³¹ Quoted in Lawrence S. Wittner, "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1970): 884-885.

³² "Universal Unrest Among Black People Revealed at National Congress Here," *Chicago Defender*, 22 February 1936, 1. According to the article, the phrase was

and individuals attending the convention came from all walks of life. Lester Granger of the conservative Urban League noted the variety and radicalism of the Congress in the pages of *Opportunity*: "Old line Republican wheel horses and ambitious young Democrats exchanged arguments; Communists held heated altercations with proponents of the Forty-Ninth State Movement, and Garveyites signed the registration books immediately after Baha'ists. . . . Such a gathering, such enthusiasm, such sustained interest are indicative of a deep-rooted and nation-wide dissatisfaction of Negroes that rapidly mounts into a flaming resentment."³³ Speakers argued for unity among the diversity and suggested that such efforts come through a "united front of all Negro organizations." In his keynote address, Randolph asserted, "The Negro should not place his problems for solution . . . at the feet of his white sympathetic allies . . . for in the final analysis, the salvation of the Negro . . . must come from within."³⁴ Randolph's nationalist theme found widespread support among many Black leaders who had spearheaded the New Negro Renaissance, including Douglas's mentors Charles S. Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois. According to James A. Harrell's study of Negro leadership in 1936, "The shock of the Depression had

made in a statement written by A. Philip Randolph and read by Dr. Charles W. Burton.

³³ Lester B. Granger, "The National Negro Congress—An Interpretation," *Opportunity* 14 (May 1936): 152-53.

³⁴ Quoted in Wittner, "The National Negro Congress," 886. For more on the topic of the National Negro Congress see James A. Harrell, "Negro Leadership in the Election Year 1936," *The Journal of Southern History*, 34, no. 4 (1968): 546-64.

converted [Du Bois] to the belief that the program of Negro integration which he himself had helped to devise was doomed to be ineffectual as long as the mass of his people could be used as a dependent labor reservoir for the white economy."³⁵

Growing nationalism came in an election year and represented a significant shift away from the New Negro goals of assimilation into the mainstream.

Thus, in February 1936, Aaron Douglas found himself speaking in front of a largely white audience even as he, too, steadily moved into an increasingly nationalist, Black-centered world. His own choices soon would carry him further away from the mainstream integrationist influences where his life had begun in the Midwest and toward an ever-growing Black consciousness, marked by a devotion of time and energy on Black issues. But in the process, he did not turn away from other issues, and he maintained a connection with the international aims espoused by the American Artists' Congress, which focused upon the use of collective action to address problems of patronage and freedom of expression.³⁶ However, as he explained in his speech to the Artists' Congress, as an African American artist his

³⁵ Harrell, "Negro Leadership in the Election Year 1936," 551. For this conclusion about Du Bois's shifting position, Harrell cites to Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1940), 319-20.

³⁶ The "Call for the American Artists' Congress," was drawn up and signed in August 1935 and published in November. Douglas participated in drafting the manifesto and was one of the original signatories to the document. More about the organizational history of the group is found in the introduction by Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams to *Artists Against War and Fascism*, especially 8-10. The same book includes the full text of the "Call for the American Artists' Congress" and a list of all the signers of the document, 47-52.

position *did* differ from that of white artists: "What the Negro artist should paint and how he should paint it can't be accurately determined without reference to specific social conditions. . . . [T]he Negro artist, unlike the white artist, has never known the big house. He is essentially a product of the masses and can never take a position above or beyond their level."³⁷ In this speech Douglas staked out the quasi-nationalist position that carried him into his mature life, one that would eventually come under fire, at least initially, by a later generation of Black artists. At that moment, though, Douglas managed to bring together the optimistic goals of the New Negro mentality with a more realist focus on social and economic gain through racial unity.

In March 1936, Douglas contributed two of his paintings to an exhibition organized by the Nebraska Art Association at his alma mater, the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. *The Chicago Defender* noted his contribution to the show and to the subsequent addition of one of the pieces, *Window Cleaning*, to the school's permanent collection.³⁸ The following fall, the university sponsored a solo exhibition of twenty-four of his paintings. The event claimed the attention of the local *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, which reported favorably on the show on October 25, 1936,

³⁷ Douglas, "The Negro in American Culture," 82-83.

³⁸ "Lincoln, Neb.," *Chicago Defender*, 28 March 1936, 23, and "Nebraska State News," *Chicago Defender*, 4 April 1936, 22.

under the headline: "University Showing Latest Work of Aaron Douglas, Colored Artist."³⁹

At home in New York, Douglas also exhibited some of his work for the 115th Street branch of the New York Public Library in the spring of 1936, and that summer he served on the jury for the Harlem Festival art exhibition. *Art Front*, the magazine of the Artists' Unions, described the festival as an example of "the excellent work that is being carried out by various government financed cultural projects." The column, authored "by C. J.," generally praised the quality of the student work and pointed to the government-funded Harlem art programs as a rare example of much-needed antidote to the typical "existent segregation and discrimination" found in W. P. A. efforts. The author, however, criticized the work of Aaron Douglas, who had offered two paintings in a show of the Harlem Artists' Guild held in conjunction with the Harlem Festival. The two landscapes, according to the columnist were "done with his usual lightness and sophistication—pleasing to look at but lacking in the simple rugged power that should be evident in the work of a man who has so often expressed a militant spirit."⁴⁰ From this critic's standpoint, Douglas's paintings were not keeping pace with his political efforts in the Black community.

Even as Douglas increased his political activities, participating in movements to aid artists and others, he continued producing art himself. In 1936, the *Chicago*

³⁹ See Stephanie Fox Knappe, "Chronology," for 1936 in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 216-17 for more from the newspaper on this show.

⁴⁰ C. J., "Art in Harlem," *Art Front*, July-August 1936, 11-12.

Defender devoted a number of columns to the Texas Centennial Exposition held that summer in Dallas. The inclusion of a Hall of Negro Life in the Exposition offered space for the work of thirty-eight visual artists, including work of "Aaron Douglass [sic] now painting murals at the Centennial." On June 26, 1936, *Chicago Defender* staff correspondent David W. Kellum reported, "In spite of the surreptitious attempts made by Dallas white citizenry to give a ludicrous tinge to the opening of the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial Exposition, merely to discredit Race participants, the \$50,000 building dedicated to the achievements of the Race was opened at noon Friday amid a blaze of glory." More than 46,000 people visited the hall on opening day, which occurred after the rest of the exposition opened because of contractor delays; perhaps it was a serendipitous error, however, because the delayed opening fell on June 19, the celebration of Juneteenth (the anniversary of the 1865 date on which abolition of slavery was proclaimed in Texas).

The overall quality of the work in the exhibition, along with the impressive story of African American achievement, seemed to impress many of the white attendees. On July 31, the *Defender* offered some responses to the Negro Hall, which ranged from U.S. Senator Joseph Guffey of Pennsylvania, who was impressed that the progress displayed "is little less than miraculous," to the surprised comment from a member of the board of education from Hawkins (a small town located east of Dallas): "You mean to say that Aaron Douglas is a Negro. He must have had a lot of

white blood. These are the finest pieces of art I have ever seen."⁴¹ Douglas's contributions to the Texas Centennial Exposition added to his status as an artistic leader of "the Race."

As he had done in both the Fisk mural series and in *Aspects of Negro Life* installed in the Harlem branch library, Douglas again chose to weave a story of the long, rich history of Black Americans, highlighting their successes, but also revealing the struggles that still resonated deeply—especially so for Black visitors from the South. The Harmon Foundation underwrote the costs for Douglas's contribution, a series of four canvases installed in the lobby of the hall. Two of the four canvases have been lost, including the first, which, according to art historian Renée Ater, "depicted a scene from the life of Estevanico, the Moroccan slave of the sixteenth-century Spaniard Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, who accompanied his master on explorations of Florida and was the first African-born slave to traverse Texas."⁴²

⁴¹ "Fine Art Works by Race Artists at Texas Exhibition," *Chicago Defender*, 20 June 1936, 3; David M. Kellum, "Race Praised on Progress at Exposition," *Chicago Defender*, 27 June 1936, 1; "83,000 Visit 'Hall of Negro Life' At Fair," *Chicago Defender*, 1 August 1936, 8.

⁴² Renée Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society': Aaron Douglas's Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 105.



Figure 3.2: Aaron Douglas, *Into Bondage*, 1936. The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The second canvas, *Into Bondage*, revealed the ugly story of the imprisonment of Africans, who are shown trudging disconsolately toward the ships that will take them across the Middle Passage into slavery (Figure 3.2). The sun sets on the chained marchers who emerge from their leafy jungle home, marking the end of one way of life for these people. Yet, in typical Douglas fashion, one figure rises above the rest, standing proudly upon a wooden podium with his shoulders squared and his chin raised, looking with hope at the single star that rises upon the horizon. Though Douglas likely would not have publicly stated it, the star may allude to his Marxist beliefs. It is also possible that it represents the North Star, the steady light in the sky that will symbolically lead the ship with its human cargo across the sea. The two

central figures, the standing man and the kneeling woman with her shackled arms raised, look to the star with hope, suggesting their optimism for the future despite the present hardship. Much as the central figure in *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction* points to hope for the future in the distant city on the hill, this man too seems to represent at once both the proud past being left behind and the eventual success that will come in the new place.

The third scene, also now lost but reprinted on the dust jacket of a 1938 publication, showed the "Negro's Gift to America." As he had done in the Harlem branch library murals, Douglas again depicted the many contributions African Americans had made as workers in building the nation, both agricultural and urban. In the foggy background the familiar urban landscape rises up in tall, lean skyscrapers. Even more pronounced than in previous paintings, however, Douglas here highlights the toil of the laborers, who include, on the left, agriculture workers and, on the right, the industrial workers of the city. A female figure in the center left holds a baby, punctuating the human contribution made by Black Americans. In a pamphlet titled "What the Negro Has Done for the United States and Texas," written by W. E. D. Du Bois and illustrated by Aaron Douglas, and distributed to thousands of visitors to the Hall of Negro Life, Du Bois made a similar point when he called "the gift of toil" the greatest contribution by Black Americans. "The necessity of human labor can never be wholly done away with," wrote Du Bois, "and the harder and more unlovely labor is at particular periods, the greater the contribution and

sacrifice of those who do it."⁴³ Both Douglas and Du Bois chose to spotlight the significance of Black labor in the formation of the United States, a nation which at that moment was poised to rise as a singular economic power in the world. In addition, Douglas's sympathy for Marxism and his own activities in supporting labor provided material for his paintings.

Douglas's final panel, *Aspiration* (1936), brings together narratives that formed benchmark traits of his work as artist/intellectual: a context for the development of American life, revelation of the pathos of that journey for a community of people, and suggestions for a better future (Figure 3.3). First, and most broadly, the image repeats the American mythos of advancement through individual achievement. The figures who have reached the platform have done so, it is implied in their symbolic attributes, through their attainment of higher education. In this accomplishment they have already taken a step ahead of the general population, who are seen only as hands below them. Further, they now have the ability to see a much brighter future in the city upon the hill to which one figure points suggestively. This city can be seen as the attainment of the fullest rewards of the progress of the American people.

⁴³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *What the Negro has Done for the United States and Texas* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936). Reprinted in Ater, "Creating a 'Usable Past' and a 'Future Perfect Society,'" 107.



Figure 3.3: Aaron Douglas, *Aspiration*, 1936. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

As in other images, Douglas represented the future hope for Black Americans in their migration from the agricultural South to the urban North. In these images, factories, skyscrapers, and other signs of urban development are generally representative of progress. Such notions were widely (though not exclusively) shared in mainstream art as well. As Wanda Corn documented in her study of white American modernists, the early twentieth -century search for a new American school of art had led a core of New York artists to "discard older definitions that linked America to nature, wilderness, democracy, and a 'new Adam.'" Instead, wrote Corn, "machine age modernists focused on industrialized America, replacing iconography

of Niagara Falls and the Rocky Mountains with that of skyscrapers, billboards, brand-name products, factories, and plumbing fixtures."⁴⁴ While Black artists often did not share the romantic notions of the agrarian past linking nature and democracy due to their own symbolic linking of agriculture with forced labor of, first, slavery and then the indentured servitude of sharecropping, some artists like Douglas found some hope for future prospects for economic and social equality in the modernist cityscape.

Moreover, through the use of the tools of science and engineering, and through the inclusion of industry in the gleaming city, Douglas tells of the achievement of humans over nature. Cultural historian Leo Marx's generative study of the role of technology in reshaping the American imagination offers such a context. Marx argued that as industrialization took hold in America in the nineteenth century it began to impact and change earlier symbols of the nation as a pastoral utopia. Through the use of education and science, humans were able, ultimately, to shape a "middle landscape" that both conquered nature and adapted to the landscape

⁴⁴ Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xv. For a study of the role of New York, especially, as the symbolic urban center of America and its impact on the development of art, see William B. Scott and Peter M. Rutkoff, *New York Modern: The Arts and The City* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Ann Douglas presents a thoroughly documented study of the excitement of New York of the 1920s Jazz Age and its impact on the development of artists, especially musicians, Black and white, in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

and nature, in a sense putting it to work for human use.⁴⁵ Douglas, too, attempted to find a way to validate Black Americans' long experience as agriculture workers, while recognizing future progress through training and the use of the human mind. All of these accomplishments—the fulfillment of an American Dream of putting the land to work for social improvement—are funneled through the individuals on the higher plane of the platform.

Such notions resonated among the Black American population of the time. Just as they had rallied for the fight in World War I, most Black Americans supported the violent struggle against fascism in the Second World War. The struggle encompassed multiple meanings for non-white Americans. Not only were they fighting against fascism from the outside, but also racism internally. Having learned from World War I, when Black leaders like Du Bois and organizations like the NAACP supported the war effort, abandoning temporarily their militancy against Jim Crow and second-class citizenship, in World War II Black leaders talked of Double V—victory abroad and victory at home. The proposed 1941 March on Washington,

⁴⁵ See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Through the study of literature, Marx builds this definition for this middle landscape. In looking at Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Marx follows the movement of the protagonist in his moves between city and country. He wrote, "Thus the symbolic action, as in our American fables, has three spatial stages. It begins in a corrupt city, passes through a raw wilderness, and then, finally, leads back toward the city." But, Marx explained, he was "not returning to the same [city] from which [he] came." The rural experience intervened in the urban experience, and vice versa, creating "a symbolic middle landscape created by mediation between art and nature" (70-71).

the fight for a Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), the lobbying for full participation of Blacks in the armed services, were all examples of Black resolve to keep fighting for their constitutional rights. Many Black Americans held on to some hope that quashing the racism and fascism in Europe would contribute to the end of Jim Crow and racism in America.⁴⁶ Thus, the way would be opened in their homeland for the "natural" rise—or at least begrudging acceptance--of talented individuals regardless of color.

This American story certainly would have been a familiar one to Aaron Douglas. After all, the story paralleled his life to some degree. Born to poor laborers in a midwestern town, he had come to achieve prominence through hard work and access to a public education. This, in turn, paved the way for his own attainment of a college education (a relatively rare accomplishment for a person of any race),⁴⁷ which led to his personal triumph as a working artist in Harlem, New York. Like the figures on the platform, Douglas had risen above his humble origins and could now at least

⁴⁶ See Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 19-57.

⁴⁷ In 1940, just under 7 percent of white males had completed a college education. By comparison, only 1.5 percent of Blacks males had done so. Among females almost 5 percent of white females had attained college educations, while almost the same percentage of Black females as males--1.4 percent—had received degrees. For that year, when you add in the "other race" (2.7 percent) and "foreign-born" (4.0 percent) males, (no data for females in these categories was reported), the total American population with a college degree equals less than 25 percent of the population. Matthew Sobek, "Table Bc798-805—College graduation rates by sex, nativity, and race: 1940-1997," in *Historical Statistics of the United States Millennial Edition Online* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2008) accessed through the University of Kansas, 9 March 2008.

see the bright future ahead of him. As a 35-year-old artist, he had reason to believe his own life still had much in store for him.

Aspiration represents another sort of American journey—the story of the domination of one group over another, of power and subjugation. This second story line plays out alongside the first. Reading the image from the bottom up, the sight of anonymous hands raised up in shackles first appears. In the lowest register of the scene, the hands also appear against the darkest part of the canvas. Without faces or bodies, the hands represented the earlier generations of anonymous Black Americans living in slavery or near-slavery upon whose labor the nation was built. Alternately, they may also be read as the hands of contemporary folks without the resources to fight the Jim Crow segregation of the times, and so, still shackled by the power of the American white mainstream. In either case, this anonymous lower class forms the foundation for the advancement of the few who rise above them.

In the middle register of the canvas, the figures are shown climbing up a platform supported by the many below. While two of the figures—the clearly male ones—have made it firmly onto the platform, one figure is shown emerging from below, not quite all the way up. This figure appears to be female, garbed in a long dress, with longer hair and more finely defined facial features than her male counterparts. The woman reclines on the edge of the platform with one hand behind supporting her weight and the other holding open a book, which may represent the

role, again, of education, but, equally, might be seen as representative of the role of the Bible and church life in the Black community.

The tilt of the woman's back echoes that of the men's forward striding leg, linking her to them, even as she provides a visual link for the movement from below to above. At the same time, the disparity in height separates the woman from the men. While this may be read as a connecting device used by Douglas, it remains significant because he chose to include a woman in the image and because the woman's position is markedly different from that of the men.

The New Negro notion of a "talented tenth" of racial leaders emerging to lead the masses toward a better life rhetorically was predicated upon masculine ideals of leadership. Harlem leader and Rhodes scholar Alain Locke in his 1925 introductory essay "Enter the New Negro" exemplified this sort of language when he described the impact of the Black migration from the rural South to the industrialized North and Midwest:

The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in *his* poetry, *his* art, *his* education and *his* new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about. From this comes the promise and warrant of a new leadership. [emphasis added]⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," from *Survey Graphic (Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro)* (March 1925): 631.

In fact, the "Young Negro" artists that Locke goes on to name within the essay were both male (Langston Hughes and Claude McKay). Likewise, the acknowledged leadership of the New Negro Movement remained overwhelming male (Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White). This gendered trend reflected broader American habits—indeed, women in the United States had only been guaranteed the right to vote a few years earlier with the passage of the nineteenth amendment to the constitution in 1920. At the same time, the Black community in America seemed willing to recognize the force of women in shaping their future.

W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance, in a chapter from his book *The Philadelphia Negro* published in 1899, mostly avoided gendered pronouns in describing the process of racial uplift, instead referring to class groups as a whole. "Above all," he lectured,

the better classes of the Negroes should recognize their duty toward the masses. They should not forget that the spirit of the twentieth century is to be the turning of the high toward the lowly, the bending of Humanity to all that is human; the recognition that in the slums of modern society lie the answers to most of our puzzling problems of organization and life, and that only as we solve those problems is our culture assured and our progress certain. . . . [T]he Negro must learn the lesson that other nations learned so laboriously and imperfectly, that his better classes have their chief excuse for being in the work they may do toward lifting the rabble.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "What is the Negro Problem?" from *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and reprinted in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. by Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 351.

In fact, Du Bois, writing in 1915 on the issue of women's suffrage, encouraged recognition of the equality—and therefore the necessity of voting privileges—for women. Drawing from his own experiences of marginalization from the dominant, Du Bois plainly stated, "The statement that woman is weaker than man is sheer rot: It is the same sort of thing that we hear about 'darker races' and 'lower classes'." "It is inconceivable that any person looking upon the accomplishments of women today in every field of endeavor," asserted Du Bois, "realizing their humiliating handicap and the astonishing prejudices which they face and yet seeing despite this that in government, in the professions, in sciences, art and literature and the industries they are leading and dominating forces and growing in power as their emancipation grows,—it is inconceivable that any fair-minded person could for a moment talk about a 'weaker' sex."⁵⁰ Du Bois's influence on the development of Aaron Douglas is attested to by the artist; even before he met and came under the sponsorship of Du Bois, Douglas had professed the importance of Du Bois's persuasive editorials he read in the pages of *The Crisis*. Thus, returning to Douglas's painting, it seems reasonable to read the three central figures through the kind of framework suggested by Du Bois.

In the year following the Texas Centennial Exposition, in 1937, Douglas received a one-year Julius Rosenwald Foundation fellowship, which he used to tour the South while serving as artist-in-residence at three Black institutions: Fisk in

⁵⁰ Du Bois, "Woman Suffrage," from *The Crisis* 11 (November 1915), reprinted in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. by Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 378.

Nashville, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and Dillard University in New Orleans.⁵¹ His decision to involve himself more with historic Black colleges and his experiences there contributed to his growing nationalism and solidified his commitment to serve the Black community. Thus, in spring 1938, he accepted an invitation to teach at Fisk University. Before heading for his first year teaching at Fisk, Douglas earned another government commission through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Treasury Relief Arts Project (TRAP) to complete a mural for the Atlantic City Housing Project in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The project, officially known as the Stanley S. Holmes Village, opened with great fanfare on May 1, 1937, and provided segregated, low-income homes for 277 African American families by the time it reached full occupancy in July.⁵²

⁵¹ "Rosenwald Fund Makes 30 Awards," *New York Times*, 1 May 1937, 21. Douglas also mentions the fellowship award in "An Autobiography," Box 1, File 1, 19, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tenn. (microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

⁵² Albert E. Hart, "Model Village to be Opened May 1," *Chicago Defender*, 17 April 1937, 18; "PWA Houses in Atlantic City Are Fully Rented," *New York Times*, 11 July 1937, 158.



Figure 3.4: Aaron Douglas, 1937. Stanley S. Holmes Village, Atlantic City, New Jersey.

In the single panel Douglas executed for the New Jersey housing development, he chose to represent the great orator and leader Frederick Douglass (Figure 3.4).⁵³ Rather than utilizing the modernistic devices (flattened forms, circles of light and color, etc.) that characterized his other murals series, Douglas chose to employ more of the techniques typical of his portraits and landscapes, and of other muralists in the federal program. While the familiar motifs of skyscrapers, factories, and homes fill the background of the outdoor scene, the buildings are all rendered in a

⁵³ A photograph of the mural is included in Olin Dows, "Art for Housing Tenants," *Magazine of Art* 31, no. 11 (1938): 618. Although Dows, an administrator for the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP, 1935-1939), prominently featured the image of the mural in his essay, he made no mention of it specifically in the text. The title listed in this article is *Education of the Colored Man*. It is not clear if this is Douglas's choice, or the title given by Dows to the mural.

more realistic, three-dimensional manner. Once again, the skyscrapers and the factories may be read as shorthand for the contribution of African Americans in building the United States. But, in this scene, the cityscape seems pushed further back, and the more centrally positioned factory seems rural in its rendering. With its wooden water tank nestled in the V formed between two buildings that could be mistaken for barns if not for the chimneys rising behind one of them, the grouping looks more like the grain elevators found in Kansas and other rural states alongside the railroad lines than a site of urban production. The house sitting on a hill on the left of the canvas, too, has the air of a comfortable country home. The decidedly bucolic setting that surrounds the figures in the foreground with Frederick Douglass adds to this rural effect.

The figures, too, are different from those in his earlier murals. Rather than using the abstracted forms and Egyptian-inspired, profiled body patterns, Douglas produced more realistic, three-dimensional forms here as well. Frederick Douglass is easily recognized by his familiar face, hair, and vested suit. The seven figures surrounding Douglass rest under the leaves of large deciduous trees, as Douglass stands among them holding out a book with one hand and what appears to be a microscope in the other. He seems to be offering them the gifts of education, which will presumably move them from their impoverished lives of labor into something better. The three figures on the left of the canvas, all with their backs to the viewers, form a visual line up to Douglass. The woman furthest back kneels with her chained

hands raised up slightly in front of her body. The male figure in front of her rests on the ground with one knee down and one up, as he holds a hoe in front of him. His clothes are visibly tattered and his feet are bare. The third woman in the trio on the left is standing with one foot forward, holding a broken chain out toward Douglass, as if to represent the effect of the education he offers in breaking the chains that bind slaves.

The four figures on the right side of Douglass form more of a circle, and one of the figures, with her head uplifted, faces the viewer. She seems almost to be looking at the young man standing at attention in full Union-gray military garb with his gun, bayonet in place, at this side. Behind these two figures, a shirtless man in tattered pants and no shoes sits on a tree stump. The final figure, a woman, stands to the far right next to the tall tree. She, too, seems to be shoeless as she looks forward toward Douglass. If the figures on the left represent breaking the bonds of hard labor through education, the figures on the right may allude to the history of slavery and the subsequent fight for emancipation.

The Black man with a gun in his hand may also signal the more militant, or at least more radical, attitude that Douglas felt at that moment. Changes had occurred in the decade since the young man had arrived in Harlem with the hopes of making it big as an artist. Not only had Douglas matured, but also the bleak economic conditions of the Depression years were devastating Black urban communities. Douglas chose a new artistic formula of realism to reflect his more sober attitude,

even as he retained some familiar elements in his painting here. As he had expressed in his 1934 newspaper interview, his "Hallelujah" period had passed; now he was working from a self-consciously leftist orientation.

A year later, in the fall of 1938, Douglas earned a second Rosenwald fellowship, which allowed him to travel outside the United States to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the Virgin Islands. He used this foreign travel to further expand his worldview, exploring and visually documenting not only Black communities outside the United States but also Black-governed ones. While he did not abandon his modernist aesthetic entirely, Douglas seemed to shift his attention to producing more portraits and landscapes in a style that echoed his sober, realistic evaluation of the world.

In addition to the Haiti paintings, Douglas created a series of portraits during this time. In 1936 he completed a study of his wife, Alta Sawyer Douglas (Figure 3.5). In 1938 he painted *Boy with Toy Plane*, and in 1940 he created a *Portrait of Marian Anderson* (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). Within these pieces we see the love of draftsmanship that Douglas had expressed in his younger days, and we can study how he used this format to express the complexity and individuality of Black Americans that could not be translated into the more abstracted mural histories he produced. Through the use of less abstracted portraiture, Douglas found another way to demonstrate the pride, dignity, and accomplishment of African Americans. In these images Douglas visually expressed what he later put into words: "I refuse to

compromise and see blacks as anything less than a proud and majestic people."⁵⁴

Douglas had philosophically moved into new ground in 1934 with his Marxist study. Instead of marking a new direction for Douglas, however, the increased political activism took him further down a path that he had begun in the Midwest with his focus on becoming a painter, into the years when he began to think of himself as educator, and through his role as public leader.



Figure 3.5: *Alta*, 1936. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville.

⁵⁴ Quoted by David C. Driskell in *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 153.

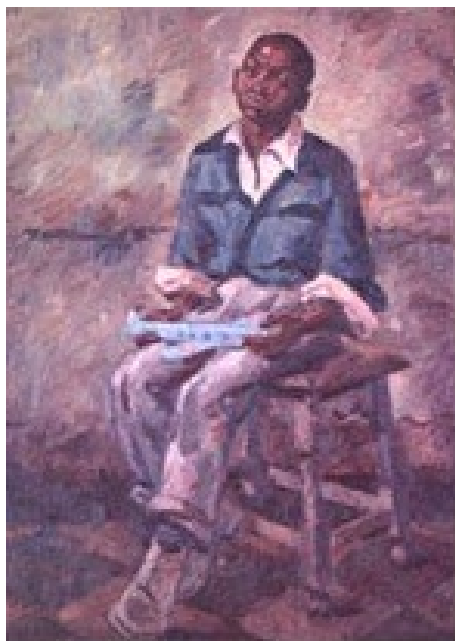


Figure 3.6: Aaron Douglas, *Boy with Toy Plane*, 1938. The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art.



Figure 3.7: Aaron Douglas, *Portrait of Marian Anderson*, 1940. Collection of Wilson, Deborah & Lauren Copeland, Detroit

Examples of his political consciousness can be found in both his art and his activities of the 1930s. Like his friend, Langston Hughes, during these years of upheaval Douglas took part in a number of causes, both national and international. For instance, both Hughes and Douglas took an interest in the case of the Scottsboro Boys, so-named for the town in Alabama where nine Black youths were taken after being falsely accused and imprisoned for the rape of two white women on a train. The outrageousness of the claims and the travesty of the subsequent verdict, which sentenced eight of the young men to the electric chair and one to life in prison, claimed international attention.⁵⁵ Using his art and any political clout he might carry, Hughes undertook a number of efforts to bring attention to the case, including a poem published in *Opportunity* in December 1931 titled "Scottsboro" and a play that appeared that same fall as "Scottsboro, Limited: A One Act Play." Despite the pleas of his mother and others to stay away, Hughes visited the men in prison in Alabama as part of a January 1932 southern tour that raised a good deal of controversy for the

⁵⁵ For more on the Scottsboro case see Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Revised ed.; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). See also Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 328-338, for a description of cultural events organized to raise funds for the young men's legal defense. As Denning recognized earlier in his study, the Scottsboro case motivated many Black Americans to becoming more politically active, and it served as a vehicle for political coalition building that would continue under through the National Negro Congress (15-16).

increasingly radical writer.⁵⁶ Hughes's anger at the travesty of justice rings out in his poem: 8 BLACK BOYS IN A SOUTHERN JAIL. / WORLD TURN PALE! / 8
black boys and one white lie. / Is it much to die? (formatting in original).



Figure 3.8: Aaron Douglas, *Scottsboro Boys*, ca. 1935. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁶ See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: 1902 – 1941, I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 216-231. See also, Regennia N. Williams and Carmaletta M. Williams, "Mother to Son: The Letters from Carrie Hughes Clark to Langston Hughes, 1928 – 1938," in *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 2007), 115.

Similarly, Douglas took up the cause of the Scottsboro Boys utilizing his own artistic talents. In 1935 he portrayed two of the imprisoned men, Clarence Norris and Haywood Patterson, in a poignant portrait executed in pastels (Figure 3.8). Evocative of the sensitive portraiture of Douglas's artistic mentor Winold Reiss, the image captures both the youthfulness and the signs of the heavy burden carried by Norris and Patterson as they languished in the Alabama prison. Like the earlier Reiss portraits, here Douglas chose to present only the heads of the two men in order to keep the focus on their faces. Each of the young men looks steadily ahead at the viewer, expressing a dignity beyond their young years. Their steady gaze, too, reinforces the assertion of their innocence of the trumped-up rape charges for which they had been convicted. Throughout the rest of his career, Douglas increasingly returned to portraiture, a form at which he felt he had excelled early in his artistic training, as a way of capturing the beauty of Black people. This pastel stands as outstanding example of his ability to capture the individuality and inner-spirit of his subjects.

While it is not documented where, or if, Douglas exhibited this portrait, that year he helped organize, "The Struggle for Negro Rights in Exhibition," for which he also served as a juror. The exhibition was undertaken as a response to a similar NAACP-sponsored show that year, "An Art Commentary on Lynching," from which "two Harlem-based organizations with ties to the Communist party" (the League of

Struggle for Negro Rights and the International Labor Defense) had been barred by NAACP.⁵⁷ Many Black Americans, including both Hughes and Douglas, found themselves discouraged by the lack of significant action by the NAACP in the Scottsboro case. The willingness of the Communist party to take a strong stand in defending the Scottsboro Boys, in contrast, drew many supporters to their side at that moment. Both artists used their art as part of the ongoing struggle to free the Scottsboro Boys.⁵⁸

A second parallel in the lives of Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglas came in the form of their support for the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939. Rebels led by General Francisco Franco, with the assistance of fascist

⁵⁷ For more on Douglas's participation in The Struggle for Negro Rights Exhibition see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926 – 1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 65. See also Helen Langa, "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* 13, no. 1 (1999): 10-39.

⁵⁸ Hughes and Douglas were not, of course, the only artists who documented the plight of the Scottsboro Boys. Two other visual artists, Tony Perez and Lin Shi Khan, produced a set of prints, also in 1935, which were published in a book with a foreword by Mike Gold, an editor of *New Masses*. The original 118 linoleum prints were recently reprinted in a volume newly edited by Andrew H. Lee, with a new foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley based on the only remaining copy of the original publication. As Lee remarks in his introduction, "Seldom has art been used to argue for a specific and immediate outcome, particularly in a series of court cases, the way that it was done during the Scottsboro case. And rarely has a cause produced art with such an intimate link to a specific, concrete, and finite political demand: 'Free the Scottsboro Boys'" (1). The efforts to free the nine met with mixed results. In 1937, charges against four of the nine were dropped "as a result of back-door negotiating with Alabama liberals," according to Robin Kelley. Although none of the defendants were executed, Clarence Norris was not released from jail until 1976 (x-xi). Lin Shi Khan and Tony Perez, *Scottsboro Alabama: A Story in Linoleum Cuts*, ed. Andrew Lee, foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

Germany and Italy, ultimately won. For four years, however, a coalition of liberals, socialists, anarchists, and communists known collectively as the Popular Front fought to maintain control for the people against the old-guard coalition of powerful landowners, the Catholic Church, and the Spanish army. The fighting was a bitter and bloody prelude to World War II. Stories of atrocities committed during the Spanish Civil War rallied pro-democracy sympathizers around the world.⁵⁹

Langston Hughes had already put forward his radical political leanings in numerous poems, plays, and presentations. In 1937 he published his ode to the Spanish people, "Song of Spain." That summer Hughes received and accepted an invitation to attend the Second International Writers' Congress to be held in Spain and Paris. He used the occasion to serve as a special correspondent for two African American newspapers, the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Cleveland Call and Post*, reporting for four months on the fighting in Spain. While there, in addition to posting his regular reports and essays for the newspapers, he continued to write poetry and to collaborate with Spanish writers, including a project of translating into

⁵⁹ For a brief overview of the Spanish Civil War see "Spanish Civil War," *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://www.search.eb.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/eb/article-214833>, accessed 23 February 2008. A more comprehensive treatment of the war can be found in Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War, 1931-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

English the work of Federico García Lorca, the renowned Spanish poet and civil war martyr.⁶⁰

In his reports to the American public, Hughes included stories of African Americans heroically fighting as part of the International Brigades in Spain. His stories of interracial harmony on the part of the international coalitions contrasted with the Franco-led fascist's abuse of conscripted Moorish fighters. In his essay on Hughes in Spain, Michael Thurston related Hughes's observation that "blacks in the International Brigades rise to command positions and give unquestioned orders to white soldiers beneath them, [while] these 'illiterate African colonials [are] forced to obey the commands of the Fascist generals' and [are] 'spurred on by promises of loot.'"⁶¹ These stories of Black American bravery and of racial equity inspired the readers back home to rally their resources for the cause.

Aaron Douglas was among those drawn to this cause. In August 1938 Douglas appeared in a group photograph in front of an ambulance donated as a "gift of American Race people to Republic Spain."⁶² The ambulance would first tour 21 cities in the United States "to arouse humanitarian interest in the needs and suffering

⁶⁰ Michael Thurston, "Montage of a Dream Destroyed: Langston Hughes in Spain," in *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, 197-200.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 202-203. Hughes's comments appeared in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, 18 December 1937, 1.

⁶² "Race's Contribution to Spain on Tour," *Chicago Defender*, 27 August 1938, 4.

of Spain's civil population," according to *The Chicago Defender*.⁶³ A brief news column in the next week's paper listed Douglas as a member of The Negro Committee to Aid Spain that was "traveling in a well equipped ambulance, which will go to Spain in September as a gift from the committee."⁶⁴ Douglas is prominently positioned front and center in the photo (Figure 3.9).



Figure 3.9: Photograph from *Chicago Defender*, 27 August 1938.

The same photograph also appeared on the back cover of an undated booklet titled "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain," issued by The Negro Committee to Aid

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Jeannette Carter, "News from the Nation's Capital," *Chicago Defender*, 3 September 1938, 11.

Spain with the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. The pamphlet tells the story of Salaria Kee, a nurse from Akron, Ohio, who trained in Harlem Hospital, where she experienced racism typical of that found in 1933. In early April 1937 she embarked with an American medical unit overseas to set up a hospital in Port Bou, Spain. A year later, in March 1938, she sustained injuries when a bomb exploded in the trench she had used for cover when her hospital unit came under fire. Back in the States during her recovery, Kee served on the same committee with Douglas to raise medical aid for Spain.⁶⁵

The booklet that recounted her story offered some of the same international links that Hughes had suggested to Black American readers. The introduction connected Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, "a terrible blow to Negroes throughout the world," with the fascist influences in Spain. "Italy moved on from the invasion of Ethiopia. She advanced her troops into Spain," the text declared. "The hundreds of Negro boys who had been prevented from going to Ethiopia understood the issues more clearly now. To them Spain was now the battlefield on which Italian fascism might be defeated. And perhaps Italy defeated in Spain would be forced to withdraw from Ethiopia."⁶⁶ Next, the link between European fascism and the American experience was forged: "The lynching of Negroes in America, discrimination in

⁶⁵ "A Negro Nurse in Republican Spain," (New York: The Negro Committee to Aid Spain, with the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, ca. 1938).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

education and on jobs, lack of hospital facilities for Negroes in most cities and very poor ones in others, all this appeared to them as part of the picture of fascism: of a dominant group impoverishing and degrading a less powerful group."⁶⁷ Douglas's involvement in this organization suggests that, while his politics may not have reached the same overtly radical level of his friend Langston Hughes, in his own way he too pursued avenues of change using both his artistic talent and his own leadership clout.

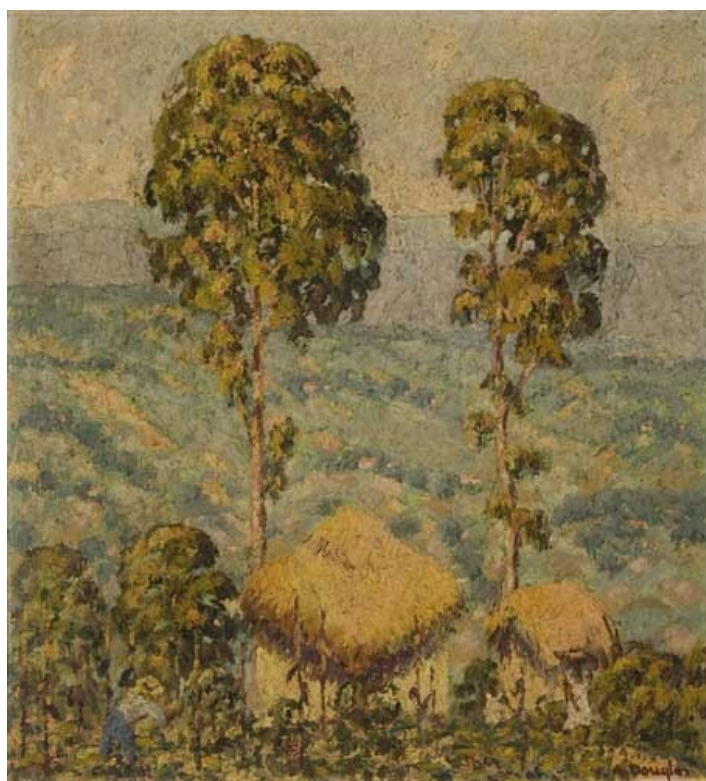


Figure 3.10: Aaron Douglas, *Haitian Landscape*, 1938. Private collection.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Throughout the closing years of the 1930s and into the early 1940s, Douglas followed a path reflecting his heightened racial and political consciousness. His studies of Haitian landscapes and people were exhibited in April 1939 at the American Contemporary Art Gallery in New York City to a mild critical reception (Figure 3.10). A notice in *The New York Times* called the work "in many ways conventional . . . yet sensitive and light effects are well managed."⁶⁸ Alain Locke was not so kind in an *Opportunity* review, where he bemoaned Douglas's "retreat from [his] bold earlier style to mild local color impressionism."⁶⁹ Douglas seemed unfazed by the criticism and continued to produce the portraits and landscapes that gave him so much pleasure.

In late summer of 1939, Aaron and Alta Douglas took an automobile tour of Mexico, which provided him even more fodder for his studies and for his growing recognition of different racial relations outside the United States. Upon their return to the United States, Aaron and Alta made a visit to their hometown of Topeka, Kansas. During his visit, C. E. Chapman interviewed Aaron Douglas for lengthy column in the Kansas City, Kansas-based Black newspaper, *The Kansas City Call*. Chapman reported that the couple "spent five weeks studying social, economic and other phases of Mexican life." In addition to their study, the artist produced 18 watercolors

⁶⁸ "Among the Other Shows," *New York Times*, 9 April 1939, X10.

⁶⁹ Alain Locke, "Advances on the Art Front," *Opportunity* 17, no. 5 (1939), 134-35.

showing "Mexican life from the lowest to the highest, particular emphasis having been given to 'the man farthest [sic] down,' to use his own words." Douglas also offered some insight into his move toward increasing realism in his work when he explained to Chapman that he believed that many artists had abstracted their work to the point of becoming unintelligible to their audiences. Such unintelligibility, Douglas asserted, "advances neither the artist, the artistic field, nor the art-loving public. There must be realism. There must be those two indispensable things—imagination and understanding."⁷⁰ Douglas here revealed the centrality of his concern that his images were comprehensible to his audience, and he showed his renewed commitment to reflecting all classes of people, but especially the working class. Finally, that he chose to emphasize the trip to Mexico as a study of "social, economic and other phases of Mexican life" speaks to the breadth of his humanitarian interest in the well-being of people, especially oppressed groups.

Arthur E. Berry, a former student of Douglas, offered insight into the elder artist's representational approach in a speech given in honor of the presentation of Douglas's papers to Fisk University in 1974. Berry recounted Douglas's response when asked by his students why he did not attempt abstract expressionism and other modern approaches. "Little by little," explained Berry, "we began to see that he had chosen a style and selected techniques that would allow him to speak in clear concise

⁷⁰ C. E. Chapman, "Color Shed When One Crosses Into Mexico – Aaron Douglas," *Kansas City Call*, 15 September 1939, 24.

terms of Black men and the empires they had built aeons [*sic*] ago, and capable of speaking as succinctly in the present about the Black man's involvement at the cutting edge of the here and now. And, he admonished each of his students to study the past for cues for now, and for the future."⁷¹ Berry came to understand that Douglas chose his aesthetic approaches and illustrative techniques based on his deeply felt dedication to speaking both to and for his people.

Aaron Douglas, at least in his later life, is often characterized as a quiet, thoughtful man—perhaps even a bit withdrawn. Yet he continued throughout his life to take public stands on issues of social justice, and he remained true to his own values in his art. *The Chicago Defender* records two different occasions when Douglas signed statements of support for the constitutional rights of the Communist party to be heard and included on electoral ballots. In 1940, Douglas, along with singer and actor Paul Robeson, author Richard Wright, and anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset, issued a statement defending free speech: "We deem it an ill omen for the entire American people that attacks are increasing against racial, political, religious and other minority groups. We know that when any minority is deprived of its democratic rights, it is particularly a threat to the largest single minority group in

⁷¹ Arthur E. Berry, "Aaron Douglas and His Art (A Speech Commemorating the Presentation of the Aaron Douglas Collection to the Fisk University Library)," published in *BANC!* a publication of Fisk University Library 4-5 (September 1974-June 1975): 9.

the country, the 12,000,000 Negro Americans."⁷² A few months later, he joined a larger group in sending a petition to President Roosevelt that more clearly staked out the position. "We," read the statement, "who are not Communists, whose concern goes beyond the preservation of their constitutional rights to the maintenance of the democratic way of life as the road into the future, urge you to oppose all legislation that would take away from Communists whose constitutional guarantees must be kept open for all if in the future they are available for any."⁷³ Such public positions must have involved personal risk, yet he repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to speak publicly about those issues.

For several years Douglas taught at Fisk University during spring semesters, while he maintained his residence at 409 Edgecombe in Harlem the rest of the year. He signaled how seriously he took his teaching responsibilities by enrolling in September 1941 for the winter session at the Teachers College at Columbia University in New York. He continued attending classes at Teachers College in the

⁷² "Actor Warns Civil Rights in Jeopardy," *Chicago Defender*, 21 September 1940, 8.

⁷³ "Communists Petition for Civil Rights," *Chicago Defender*, 15 March 1941, 3. The petition signers included "more than 150 educators, ministers, attorneys, writers, artists, youth leaders and social workers from 153 cities and towns in 37 states." Despite the given headline, the petitioners were not all communists, as the petition made clear, but rather concerned more broadly about the democratic process. Signers included Mary E. Wooley, Bishop Francis J. McConnell, Franz Boaz, Max Lerner, Theodore Dreiser, Paul Robeson, Rev. Robert W. Bagnall, Countee Cullen, and Aaron Douglas. Despite his outspoken position on a number of such occasions, Amy Kirschke noted in her study of Douglas that no FBI files on him had ever been opened, though his name was mentioned on some documents. Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 147 note 38.

winter and teaching at Fisk in the spring until his graduation from Columbia with a master's degree in February 1944. Thereafter, he devoted himself to teaching full-time at Fisk until his retirement in 1966. Throughout his tenure there, he inspired Fisk students in his classrooms and students at other predominantly Black institutions as an invited lecturer.

Accepting an invitation at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, in the fall of 1948, Douglas chose to talk on "The Negro, Too, in American Art." As he explained, the topic was one "so widely misunderstood, so inadequately treated when mentioned at all, so often misrepresented that a true and just picture of the role the Negro has played and is playing in art is extremely difficult to describe fully."⁷⁴ Douglas did his best, however, to provide a description, starting with the great art of Egypt and of India, both of which gave ample support to the notion that non-whites were just as capable as whites when it came to producing great art. After providing a condensed history of Black visual art achievement in the United States, including a fairly lengthy exposition of the stars and patrons of the Harlem Renaissance, Douglas, finally, turned to the obstacles Black artists faced.

In listing the obstacles that held back Black artists, Douglas first identified the problem of patronage. It was an issue that always plagues American artists, but was especially overwhelming for artists outside the mainstream. Douglas noted that he

⁷⁴ Aaron Douglas, "The Negro, Too, in American Art," speech delivered November 1, 1948, at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York, in Reel 1, Box 3, Folder 8, 1, Douglas Papers, Fisk University.

knew of "no really outstanding Negro collectors" but that a few institutions (Hampton Institute, Howard University, and Atlanta University) had begun collections. Next Douglas discussed the common stereotyping of Black people, which ranged from the mostly pre-World War I representation of the "amiable, pathetic and humorous side of Negro life" to a common antidote to previous portrayals emphasizing "the noble and the good." Douglas, however, argued that "artists must preserve the right to present the distorted, the ugly, the unpleasant as constituting an integral, inseparable, and necessary part of the truth and beauty of life. . . . In children's books, in book illustrations, in easel pictures, in mural decorations it is the Negro artist who must tell the story of our existence in this land, beautiful when beautiful, ugly when ugly, exalted when exalted." He believed that with the proper resources, "the extraordinary talent for art possessed by our people" would yield results. "But to obtain these results," he cautioned, "we must be prepared to exert ourselves to the utmost in patience, endurance, understanding, unselfishness, and genuine humility."⁷⁵ Douglas encouraged the students listening to his advice to follow the path of hard work, dedication, and looking beyond selfish goals. He seemed to understand that this path was neither easy nor always successful in conventional ways, yet he maintained the optimism that had characterized his earliest days that these efforts were both necessary and, in the end, worthwhile.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

From his experience growing up in Topeka, in attending midwestern integrated schools where Blacks were less than equal, and in teaching at an elite Jim Crow Black high school in Kansas City, Douglas's racial consciousness was shaped in his formative years before he settled in Harlem in the 1920s. Life in Harlem and work as an illustrator and as a major muralist employing history themes contributed to his racial consciousness. His circle of friends and colleagues and his political involvement all influenced him. In the 1930s not only did his art "speak" for him but also he began to speak out directly on race issues and art politics.



Figure 4.1: Edwin Harleston, *Portrait of Aaron Douglas*, 1930. Carolina Art Association/Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, South Carolina.

Conclusion

As previous chapters have explored, Aaron Douglas's life and work stands as an exemplary model of an individual committed to improving the world. In the past few years a number of public events have underscored his achievements. Taken

together, they have at last begun to bring to light more evidence of his lasting significance. At the same time, questions remain regarding why it has taken so long for the work of Aaron Douglas to receive recognition more broadly.

To understand Douglas as an artist, a race leader, a political actor, an educator, and a public intellectual, we have to understand his personal journey that began in middle America under largely—but not exclusively--mainstream influence, his move to Harlem and immersion into the symbolic center of American Black culture, and his connections with the history of the Black South through sojourns at Fisk University in Nashville and other Black institutions. For Douglas, it was not only a geographic move from one place to another, but a philosophical journey from a world largely dominated by the mainstream into an increasingly Black-centered world, where mainstream ideas sometimes meshed, sometimes were rejected, and often flowed parallel to Black development.

In this study, I have traced his origins in Topeka, Kansas, and Lincoln, Nebraska, where he obtained thorough, if academic, training in art, and where he gained a love for learning about a variety of subject matter. In this setting, too, he began his own studies of Black life and culture. Growing up poor, the son of working-class parents, in a city with an established Black middle-class, pushed him to work hard and find early success even within the white majority institutions that Topeka and Lincoln offered. In both high school and college, Douglas was recognized as a talented artist with great expectations for future success. That

recognition fueled his belief in his own potential, despite prevalent racist messages that might have said otherwise. His success also supported his life-long belief that education was the key to breaking away from poverty.

In the 1920s and into the 1930s, Douglas expanded his racial and political consciousness as he conceived of methods to express the Black life and spirit that surrounded him. This growing consciousness can be seen early in the 1920s as Douglas chose to teach at Lincoln High School, in Kansas City, Missouri, where he became active in Black middle-class life. His decision to move to Harlem in 1925 provided more fuel for his racial engagement, as he found himself energized and inspired by the endless activities that characterized the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Commissions for book covers, magazine illustrations, and, eventually, public murals provided much-needed income for the artist struggling at first to survive in the city. More than that, however, the commissions offered him an education in the emerging literature, poetry, music, and dance in this hub of Black culture. As he worked through the ideas he read on the pages written by Black authors, observed the struggles and entertainment of the Black folk who lived all around him, and regularly engaged with Black leaders and friends in discussions, he developed his own voice. Increasingly, he turned to historical narrative as a way to share his ideas, visually, within and outside his community. By the end of the 1920s, Douglas had developed a strong message and found a way to transmit his ideas successfully. He was tapped often to provide illustrations for books, to accompany

poetry and stories for magazines, and increasingly to provide murals for the enhancement of public spaces.

With the shifting political and economic times in the 1930s, Douglas embraced a more radical perspective and exhibited a growing Black nationalism through both his art and his other political activities. The onset of the Great Depression that economically devastated the Harlem community and the increasing international turmoil caused by the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe sent tremors through the United States as well. Many Americans came to question the efficacy of capitalism, and fears of the spread of fascism, both within and without, added to a general sense of national unrest. Many, like Douglas, studied Marxism, communism, and socialism for answers to what seemed to be the collapse of Western society. The advent of FDR's New Deal programs, starting in 1933, however, provided new openings for some Blacks to a voice in American society. New Deal programs stressed the importance of national identity, which intensified with the United States entry into World War II.¹ The focus on pulling together led to more opportunities for organization of labor, political activism, and for Blacks to unite under the Double V campaign—victory over fascism abroad *and* at home.

¹ Jonathan Harris, in his study of federal art programs, discusses the rise of "the national-popular" as "a form of discourse linking loyalties to country . . . to a belief in citizenship." Harris writes, "Roosevelt's own speeches produced and reproduced these appeals, with the claim that an American people rooted in the values of citizenship and patriotism would witness the end of social antagonisms" (20). Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

In addition, the New Deal programs brought patronage for Black as well as white artists. For the first time, the federal government offered significant support to artists through both jobs programs and building decoration programs. While many African Americans still felt that they received less support than whites did, in practice more Black artists had a chance to support themselves with their artistic labor than had ever been the case before. For Douglas, the programs both offered patronage in the form of at least two significant mural commissions, and it provided him with fodder for the further development of his Black leadership skills. In Douglas the artistic and the political impulses were interwoven. The deeper he became involved in his communities, the more his artistic voice developed. And, the reverse held true—as he developed his art to address his audiences, he became more immersed in political movements. In the 1930s and 1940s, Douglas emerged as a clear leader and as a public voice for African American concerns.

Douglas's art increasingly reflected his growing racial and political consciousness. The commissions for public murals, first at Black colleges, then in the major public buildings in his adopted hometown, Harlem, gave him a chance to reflect on Black experiences, which resulted in sophisticated, powerful narrative history paintings that represented his engagement as a public intellectual. He also was performing a broad role of "race" teacher, a role that Jacob Lawrence would often perform, that William H. Johnson took in his last productive years, and that

Romare Bearden would take as well.² Part of the power of Aaron Douglas's images resides in his attempt to re-establish that role of African Americans in building all aspects of America. The four-panel series, *Aspects of Negro Life*, may stand as the most encompassing example of this, but other images assert this story as well. In his small illustration, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers (For Langston Hughes)*, created to

² Jacob Lawrence produced a number of historical painting series that spoke to the Black experience, including *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1938); *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (1939); *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (1940); *The Life of John Brown* (1941); and his colossal *The Migration of the Negro* (1941). See Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois, eds., *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, in association with the Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, 2000.)

William H. Johnson returned to the United States late in 1938 as the threat of war in Europe intensified. Upon his return, he taught painting at the Harlem Community Arts Center and undertook a number of paintings focused on Black folk culture, including *Street Life—Harlem* (1939-40), *Café* (1939-40), *Chain Gang* (1939), and *Going to Church* (1940-41). With the official start of World War II in the United States, Johnson turned his artistic attention to depictions of Black soldiers and other war personnel, for which he received recognition from a Harlem group for his service to America through his art. During the war, Johnson continued to focus on Black folk experience, most famously through his series of *Jitterbug* paintings (1940-42). See Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company and The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1991).

Romare Bearden, too, explored the Black experience in America throughout his career. Throughout the 1960s Bearden produced a series of collages that combined paint and photomontage to represent the complexity and energy of Black life in both urban and rural settings. This group included *Evening, 9:10, 461 Lenox Avenue* (1964), *Watching the Good Trains Go By* (1964), and *The Street* (1964). In the 1970s and into the 1980s, he used a more simplified collage form with brightly colored paints to represent the jazz and blues music so important to him. These works include *City Lights* (1970), *Of the Blues: At the Savoy* (1974), and *Thank You . . . For F. U. M. L. (Funking Up My Life)* (1978). See Ruth Fine, *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, D.C.: The National Gallery of Art, 2003).

honor the significance of his friend's poem of the same name, Douglas equates the building of the Egyptian pyramids with the construction of modern civilization (Figure 4.2). By including New York skyscrapers, symbols of twentieth-century architectural achievement, and factories in full-steam progress in the same visual plane as the North African architectural touchstones, Douglas metaphorically establishes the role of African peoples in the development of both great societies.



Figure 4.2: Aaron Douglas, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers (For Langston Hughes)*. 1941, The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art.

On a larger scale, the Fisk mural, *Building More Stately Mansions*, even more dramatically illustrates this story (Figure i.2). In this paean to a post-World War II world, Douglas centralizes the role of an educated, well-trained Black work force in rebuilding civilization. Visually he shows the labor of workers and educators in the constructive forces of creating the great global architectural forms, which contrasted

with the terrible destruction wreaked by the bombs still falling from the skies at the time when Douglas painted the mural. In his image, Douglas demonstrated that Black men and women were prepared to rebuild in the wake of the terrible conflicts of a Western-dominated imperialism. Douglas's belief in the strength, power, and purpose of people of African ancestry in building societies around the globe shines through in many of his pieces.

Despite his immense popularity and rise to become a central voice in Black American politics and culture through the middle decades of the twentieth century, Douglas's reputation declined in the closing decades. To understand this decline, it is necessary to contextualize Douglas within his times. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Douglas received overwhelmingly positive reviews in the Black press. In the pages of *Crisis* and *Opportunity* his images regularly appeared from the time he arrived in Harlem in 1925 through the 1930s. Along with his illustrations, columnists in the magazines offered praise of his artistic potential. Alain Locke hailed Douglas as one of the new young stars destined to make their mark on America. Douglas's work caught the attention of white columnist Carl Van Vechten, who introduced Douglas to the readers of *Vanity Fair* in February 1926.

The rare exception to the positive reviews related to Douglas's involvement with the ill-fated publication of *Fire!!* The attempt by a cadre of young artists to create a publication "devoted to younger Negro artists" received almost universal panning in the Black press of the day. While today the single-issue production of the

journal sells well in reprint and is frequently cited in discussion of the Harlem Renaissance, at the time of its publication in November 1926 it sold few copies. Like other pieces in the magazine, Douglas's images were not spared the wrath of the newspaper critics. Perhaps most strident was Rean Graves of the *Baltimore Afro-American* who told her readers, "I have just tossed the first issue of *Fire* into the fire. . . . Aaron Douglas who, in spite of himself and the meaningless grotesqueness of his creations, has gained a reputation as an artist is permitted to spoil three perfectly good pages and a cover with his pen and ink hudge pudge."³ Even for this publication, not all the critics denounced Douglas's images, and, as Graves pointed out, Douglas had "gained a reputation as an artist."

While Douglas's work received notice in the Black press of the 1920s and 1930s, up to this point in-depth studies of African American visual culture were rare.⁴

³ Quoted in Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; reprint with introduction by Arnold Rampersad, New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 237.

⁴ An important exception is Freeman Henry Morris Murray's *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*, which was first published in 1916. Murray provided rare coverage of several Black artists, including Edmonia Lewis and Meta Warrick Fuller, and discussed works that utilized Black subject matter, such as Augustus Saint-Gaudens's *Shaw Memorial* in Boston. The book was reprinted in 1972 as part of the Black Heritage Library Collection by Books for Libraries Press (Freeport, New York). In addition, Alain Locke, an important New Negro supporter, published two earlier art histories, *Negro Art Past and Present* (1936) and *The Negro in Art* (1940), that covered much of the same ground as previously published magazine columns. While Locke did offer some criticism in his studies, Porter asserted strong opinions, especially on the generation of the New Negro Movement that preceded the new moderns of his book; predictably, Porter heavily favored the emergence of a new generation that included such rising stars as Jacob Lawrence, Richmond Barthé (a sculptor), and Romare Bearden.

Artist and Howard University professor James A. Porter sought to remedy the gap with his 1943 publication of *Modern Negro Art*. As Porter noted in his preface, in his own early attempts at research "my eyes were opened to the neglect and deliberate indifference with which Negro effort in the field of art was received."⁵ Porter, however, was no fan of Aaron Douglas. When the younger artist wrote dismissively of Douglas's work as formulaic and ineffective, his pronouncements, in hindsight, marked an end to regular public attention to Aaron Douglas.

Of course, Porter's unfavorable judgment was not the only cause for Douglas's near disappearance from the African American public art world. A number of factors came together to facilitate this. For one, Douglas consciously pulled back a bit from the center of the art scene. In spring 1938 he accepted a part-time position with Fisk University, which relocated him from New York to Nashville for a portion of the year. If few venues for the display of African American art existed in New York City in the mid-twentieth century, outside of the Fisk campus, they were non-existent in Nashville. As I have discussed earlier, this does not mean that Douglas ended his painting career. To the contrary, he continued painting and illustration projects until the end of his life. But, the move to Nashville certainly limited his involvement with emerging New York artists like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, whose work began to garner attention in the post-World War II era.

⁵ James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (1943; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1969), n.p.

Alongside the geographical shift, Douglas's acceptance of the Fisk position signaled a career shift toward teaching. Much of his time, creativity, and energy went into his teaching. As we have seen in the discussion of Douglas's earlier years, education always held a central place of importance. When he chose to take a position in an educational institution, Douglas insisted on pushing his own education to a new level. Starting in 1940, Douglas enrolled in classes at the Teachers College at Columbia University each fall semester while he was living in New York City, earning his master's degree in education in 1944. While this move further supported his role as an effective teacher, it represented a shift from the art scene.

In 1960, the Indian anthropologist Cedric Dover published his own study, *American Negro Art*, under the auspices of the New York Graphic Society Art Library. Dover dedicated the book to Aaron Douglas and featured his New York library murals on the front and end papers. In his dedication, "For Aaron Douglas," Dover acknowledged his friend's contribution: "You were there, insisting as always that the artist must reach out to life with poetry, courage and laborious craftsmanship." Yet even in his acknowledgement, Dover placed Douglas in the role of teacher and mentor more than of artist. "I was fortunate," wrote Dover about his stay with Douglas at Fisk, "since we roomed in the same house, in sharing your pleasures, philosophy and prejudices up and down the stairs for over a year." The photograph of Douglas next to the dedication shows him alongside art patron Carl Van Vechten in the Fisk art gallery named for Van Vechten in front of a Richmond

Barthé sculpture. We see Douglas the Fisk art professor and gallery organizer rather than Douglas the artist in this view.⁶

Douglas continued to be known among friends and colleagues, especially as he built up the fine arts program at Fisk University. He was called on countless times to produce images for special events and projects at Fisk University and elsewhere throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. Yet from the 1950s through the 1970s, Douglas the artist seemed to have fallen out of favor in Black art circles. Aside from some local reports on the occasional commissioned work, few media accounts from this period exist. A scan of all the issues of *Black Art* published in those years, for instance, finds no mention of the artist, even upon his death in February 1979. Likewise, reports of his work rarely appeared in the pages of *Crisis* or *Opportunity*, though his social engagements do occasionally warrant a mention in New York columns. In these years, when the stars of artists like Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and members of the Chicago-based AFRI-COBRA were on the rise, Douglas seemed to fall out of favor.

In 1971, Nathan Irvin Huggins expressed some of the discontent with the New Negro Renaissance artists in his succinctly titled *Harlem Renaissance*. Huggins argued that in terms of the achievement of social improvement, much of the cultural production of the Renaissance failed. Huggins further explained that "in questioning the quality of the works—the artistic achievement—I necessarily challenge the

⁶ Cedric Dover, *American Negro Art* (London: Studio Books, 1960), 7.

success of the 'renaissance' in delivering what it claimed for itself." Huggins especially questioned the elitism he saw in the movement, which he felt was exemplified by the dismissal of jazz music among some leaders of the day.⁷ Huggins's criticism of the elitist element that he saw in much of the work of the times reflected the critiques emanating from many of the younger artists influenced by the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. For many of them, the agendas of the earlier artists no longer felt relevant.

This trend began to break only a few years before Douglas's death, initiated in large part by his colleague at Fisk University, David C. Driskell. In 1976, Driskell curated an important exhibition for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, which subsequently traveled across the nation to Atlanta, Dallas, and Brooklyn. In the exhibition catalog, Driskell reasserted Douglas's significance in the development of Black visual art. This assertion was punctuated by the decision to put Douglas's *Building More Stately Mansions* on the catalog cover. Five of his paintings were included in this path-breaking show. If James A. Porter's dismissal of Douglas in 1943 symbolized the beginning of his disappearance from the Black art scene, Driskell's 1976 exhibition symbolically marks his steady re-emergence.

⁷ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 9.

For at least three decades, though, Douglas virtually disappeared from national attention. No single factor clearly explains this disappearance. Rather, the interaction of factors helps explain his public invisibility. First, American racism, which narrowly defined the "American" experience served to exclude the ideas and experiences of non-white people. In practice, this effectively limited the possibilities for Black artists like Douglas to be seen or heard. Few mainstream galleries—and even fewer museums—were interested in the work of non-white artists whose stories fell outside the accepted norms. Second, and related, the same limiting practices can be traced in the development of the mainstream art history, which tended (and arguably still tends) to exclude the work of artists who did not show their work in mainstream galleries and museums. Moreover, Douglas's increasing stature as a public intellectual commenting on America from an explicitly Black perspective was at odds with rising dominant sentiment that wished to present a unified American front against perceived threats from foreign influence, particularly that of communism. Finally, even among Black cultural critics, the work of the earliest pioneers were often rejected and ignored because of their supposed failure to address the larger needs of the people. While Douglas has yet to be fully recognized in all of these areas, the opening of a retrospective exhibition of his work in 2007 at last makes the breadth of his life and work available to a broader national audience.

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